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64 Pages

Reading Hour

short fiction essays verse reviews



and Serpents Bloom

► The Cleaning Ladies Of Kabul
Rajesh Talwar

C K Meena, Nilanjan Choudhury

Stories / Poetry by:

Adreyo Sen

Jayaram Vengayil

Smara

Ankush Banerjee

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Sudarshan Shidore

Geetha Ravichandran

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Sometimes I feel I too
have a book in me

Where on earth have you
been grazing lately?



SANDY
13.8.14

Reading Hour

short fiction essays verse reviews

Editorial

I like the word indolence, says Bern Williams, it makes my laziness seem classy. One can not only agree, but perhaps even extrapolate... indolent is somehow redolent, too, and how much classier to be redolent! Language can undoubtedly turn everything on its head – it can expand and limit worlds, it can bring about belonging and 'unbelonging', it can create and constrain experience. We attended an informal 'Adda' recently where writers, theatre folk, poets and others met to discuss the legitimacy of Indian Writing in English (IWE) vis a vis other Indian languages, given the latest flare ups around the topic. At least ten mother tongues represented in one living room, and needless to say, the common fallback was English. For many of us, having had nomadic childhoods, English became the language we thought in, and therefore, expressed ourselves in. But language, especially the language of literature, is much more than the sum of syntax, script and phonetic. There was a Tamil love poem translated in an older issue – "Mother, live long. Listen. / The muddy water of his country / at the bottom of a pond / lapped by animals / and covered with dead leaves / is sweeter than the milk / laced with honey / from our own backyard." The translator commented: "...even as I translated them (the Ainkurunuru poems) I discovered something: a lost world, a civilisation close to Nature, but whose sophistication of metaphor a metropolitan poet would envy." Of course, language gave him both the access and the appreciation. Perhaps those that denounce IWE fear not only the loss of access to much of Indian literature but also to the sentiment behind "Mother, live long"!

Writers, hopefully, will continue to write in whichever language(s) they can be honest in, and readers, hopefully, will keep alive many languages, and their literature. Reading Hour celebrates both readers and writers! Thank you for picking up this issue – we hope you enjoy the stories and poetry on offer, the lively conversation between writers C K Meena and Nilanjan Choudhury, and the glimpses of Kerala and Kabul.

Happy reading!

~Editors

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CONTENTS

FICTION

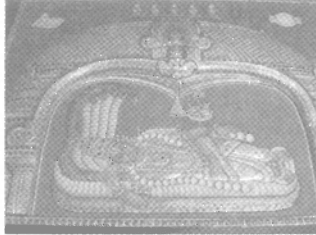
- 3 Lighter Karma
Smara
- 12 One Day Too Late
Vidya Panicker
- 21 Sinbad
Adreyo Sen
- 29 Please Clean My Room
Jayaram Vengayil
- 41 An Old Client
P Shukla & L Luthria
- 50 Five More Minutes
Percy Bharucha

POETRY

- 11 The House By The Wooden
Bridge At Silcoorie
Goirick Brahmachari
- 16 Love In The Time Of Physics
Sudarshan Shidore
- 16 Exam Time
Sudarshan Shidore
- 28 Unbreakable
Richa Wahi
- 33 I Learnt Guilt From A Packet Of
Lentils
Ankush Banerjee
- 40 Tumbling Through The Temple
Geetha Ravichandran
- 56 Admiration
Ankush Banerjee

Cover Design: M P Mohan
Cover Painting: Milind Mullick

ESSAY



- 17 Where A Thousand
Serpents Bloom
Sreelata Menon

FIRST PERSON

- 57 The Cleaning Ladies Of Kabul
Rajesh Talwar

25 LIGHT STUFF

47 REVIEWS

60 LAST PAGE

IN CONVERSATION



34

C K Meena,
Nilanjan Choudhury



FICTION

Smara is an award-winning children's writer who enjoys writing horror, romance, and similar R-rated stuff without being blacklisted.

Lighter Karma

Smara

Dec 28
The ad catches my eye immediately. It probably does so for millions of other women in India, since the newspaper prides itself on being the nation's leading daily. Unlike similar ads printed on the same page, this one is lettered in a peculiar font type, such as is used in the Incredible India campaigns. A font that evokes Indian tradition and culture. It contrasts somewhat with the content itself.

SLIM DOWN IN 6 MONTHS

NO diet, NO exercises, NO hormones!

100% SAFE,

Pay AFTER you see results!

Contact Apsara at 1-800-SLIM-DOWN!



I look down at my body, encased in a loose salwar kameez. It is the body of a lonely primary teacher who has spent years depending on comfort food to get through life's disappointments. Soft armour to face the extra-hard knocks.

Sighing, I drop the newspaper into the bin. Why should I make the effort? It's not like I am a fresh-faced virgin who needs to snare a rich guy. Been there done that. Buried him too.

Widows have no need to be slim.

Dec 31

Last day – and night – of the year, and I am watching 'Best of ___' highlights and crying into my fried chicken. Yet another new year's eve, spent with long-time friends Colonel Sanders, Haldiram and Mother Dairy.

My room looks and smells like a cheap fast food restaurant. Half-yearly break from school has translated into a break from hygiene and order. Mounds of old clothes loom ominously in all corners, while books and takeaway containers litter the floor around the sofa. The huge flat screen TV, Mukund's last purchase before his liver called it a day, keeps me good company but already shows signs of aging. The dusty knick-knacks arranged on the TV stand do not help either, trying their best to complete the gloomy look of my apartment.

I like it, though. I like clutter. It makes the room feel... more occupied. Brighter in the nights. When you do not want to remember that you sleep alone.

I know I should be tidier, at least for the sake of my health, but after managing rampaging children all week, I'd rather not clean. Anyway, who do I have to impress?

I look at the svelte young thing on TV, talking exuberantly about the coming

New Year and new goals and new beginnings. I sigh. What new beginnings? It is the same old grind, over and over again. Mukund's investments yield me a small interest every month, which means that as a single woman in India, I really do not have anything to complain about. I love working with children and spend all week at the day boarding school that I work for. I only come 'home' during the weekends.

Home. A two-bedroom apartment that I bought in this new city, from the insurance money. How could I live in that place where Mukund died? Selling it and splitting the money with his grasping family was the only way I could make a fresh start. In a new city, amidst people who had no connection with my roots. I had finally felt free.

My needs are simple – books, clothes and food. Especially, food. Hot, cold, rich, heavy, cooked, raw, give it to me in any form and I will gobble it down. I love food. As is evident from the rolls of fat under my face and shoulders and miscellaneous parts of my body.

Fat, bitter tears flood my eyes. What happened to you, Pragnya, I howl silently. You used to be such an attractive woman. But after Mukund, the happiest drunkard on earth, passed away, leaving me empty and relieved, I'd just let myself go.

The TV is loud, almost deafeningly so. "Remember, you only have ONE life! So come on, take a new year's vow to change your life, you will thank yourself for it!" burbles the Svelte Young Thing on TV.

Whether it is seeing the sylph in the miniskirt, or hearing the genuine passion in her voice, I come to a decision. I

couldn't change Mukund... I couldn't stop him from drinking. But perhaps I could stop eating myself to death. I will call... what was her name? I fish out the paper from the bin and re-read the ad. Apsara. I will call her tomorrow.

Jan 2

This is awkward. Meeting both Sonal and Ruchi at LIGHTER KARMA.

That's the name of the company that had advertised in the paper. It is located all the way across town. Chennai is a small city, but transport connections are abysmal which means that you have to shell out generously for a cab if you want to go outside the centre. It costs me nearly 500 rupees to arrive at the serene bungalow on the edge of a manmade reservoir in Red Hills. Half-expecting to be robbed and raped, I look around. How could a company be located at such a deserted spot?

As I double check the address and enter the building, I am in for more surprise. I expect the inside to look like a swanky gym, but it is quite the opposite. It looks like a temple, with ornately designed stone interiors and sweet incense perfuming the air. I feel as if I have wandered onto a movie set.

One thing is as expected, though. Like how gyms are always run by svelte, well-dressed women, this one too has the same strain of pretty females walking around, speaking in hushed tones. Pretty is actually the wrong word, I think, as I take in the dusky, smiling women clad in silk sarees leading us into separate sitting rooms. They are blatantly gorgeous.

As I enter the ballroom (no other word

to describe that), I gasp. I am right in assuming that the entire nation must have seen the ad. The room is teeming with women, in varying degrees of obesity, from merely chubby to how-can-you-still-be-alive-enormous. I actually look thin next to some of them!

Like the sour-faced Sonal. That's what we staff call her at school. Mother to Kajal, the angelic topper of my class, and married into one of the richest families in the city, Sonal is a textbook example of trophy wife gone wrong. She bulges in all the wrong places and she knows she looks awful. She vents her humiliation on everyone she meets, and that frequently includes us Third Grade teachers.

She does not look as bad as Ruchi though, my annoying cousin with an axe to grind.

Ruchi was raised by her parents using the "Look At Pragnya" method, and after years of being exhorted to be like me, Ruchi became everything I was not. A corporate lawyer with a nasty voice and a lovely family that she controls like a dictator. Except for our fat behinds, we have nothing in common.

Meeting both of them in a place where the idea was to slim down in six months. As I said, awkward. After an incredibly uncomfortable greeting, we sit far away from each other, avoiding eye contact.

I hate waiting rooms, they make me sleepy. I should have brought a paperback to read – but who would have expected a bloody waiting list to join a gym? I decide to practice meditation instead, but soon the incense and the visual of the pretty staff flitting from one room to another, prove stronger than my good intentions.

My eyes start closing.

Just then, my name is called. And I, half-asleep, spring up from my chair. I become aware of a buzz of disapproval. "We came before her, why is she going in first!" complains a shrill voice I recognise.

The girl smiles, showing a line of perfect, milky white teeth and says in a soft, butter-smooth voice. "Customers get served based on the Counsellor available for their body type. I assure you, you will be called when your Counsellor is free to see you."

The implied insult is effective in shutting up the indignant voice, and I pretend I have not seen Sonal as she sits down, fuming.

The girl leads me into a small room, where the most beautiful woman I have ever seen is tapping away at a laptop keyboard. I look around wildly. I am not bad-looking myself, but there is a peculiar kind of humiliation a... larger woman feels, around size zero sirens.

Gorgeous looks up and spots me. "Ah, Miss Pragnya! I hope you were not waiting long," she says in a melodious voice. "Your Karma points have helped you get ahead in the line and we are happy to enrol you in our Karma fitness promise."

What? "Excuse me..."

"Call me Apsara," she says, and I can't help feeling flattered. My Counsellor – a fancy term for personal trainer, I guess – is the one mentioned in the ad. Surely she must be some sort of Queen Bee here. Misreading my silence, she continues. "You will lose two dress sizes in the next six months and only then you need to pay. Thank you for your time and I will

see you in July.”

I blink. Did the woman just dismiss me? I had assumed I would be kept here for hours and sold some fitness mantra, but I did not expect nonsense like this. “Er, what Karma points? I am confused...”

“Do you believe in Karma, Miss. P?” she asks, looking at me intently.

“Uhhh... I think so. Most people in the country do.”

“So you believe that we are all here because we are paying off some karmic debt?” She persisted. “That if we are good, good things happen to us... and vice versa, of course.”

“Yes... I guess.” I say, looking about myself, wondering if this is one of those hidden-camera reality shows.

My tone must have irritated her, because she stands up. “Well, sometimes an explanation may be more puzzling than the question. So I apologise, Miss P, but I have hundreds more to see today. I promise you, you will have your answers within the next six months. Good day.”

Before I can open my moth, I am whisked out of the room and deposited at the doorstep of LIGHTER KARMA.

I do not know whether to laugh or rant at the ridiculousness of it all. What a waste of a day, and what a load of mythical mumbo-jumbo. I ought to complain about these people to the newspaper. Did they even know they had printed the ad of a bogus company?

But... what did they dupe me of? My head starts to throb. I decide to forget the whole thing and just go home. School is reopening tomorrow and I need to get ready, mentally, to join the land of the living.

Jan 3

Today, I bump into a man.

I am hurrying to school, and as I exit my apartment building, this sweet-looking stranger literally walks into me. Both of us hurt our heads, and groan. I expect him to lash out at me – most men I know would do it – but he is different. Not only does he apologize profusely, he offers to take me to the hospital!

I am touched. It has been a long time since someone was so considerate with me.

Jan 15

His name is Vikram. Vikki for short. He is a research scholar from Sri Lanka, currently living in Chennai. He has just moved into my building and is well on his way to moving into my heart.

I know, this is terrible. At my age, having a crush, and on a much younger man.

But I can't help feeling thrilled. It's been a life time since I had these feelings...

Jan 25

Can you believe it? Vikki and I are joining a gym today. He also has a few extra kilos he'd like to lose, and he suggested we become fitness buddies.

Vikram is also lonely, and it is magic when two lonely people become friends. That's what we are, though. Strictly friends.

Though I'd like to be more. But I am never telling him that.

Feb 10

I think Vikki likes me. He hasn't said anything... but a woman knows. I

know... and I am so happy.

On my way home from school, I stop at Lifestyle to buy a tracksuit. Vikki wants to jog every morning, and I think it's a good idea. He says we need vitamin D from the morning sun light... this means I cannot board on weekdays at my school. I can live with that. I now come back home every evening.

We have dinner together, and most of the times he cooks for me. Though I hardly eat these days... the sight and smell of him is enough to fill me.

It's funny really... I never felt this way with Mukund.

But right now, there is no Mukund in my life. Only Vikki. He promised me a light dinner tonight, and I wait for the doorbell to ring. Hopeless, that's what I am.

Mar 12

I indulge in some gossip. Sonal has been AWOL for a few weeks and I want to talk with her about Kajal. That's when I know. "Of course she is off the radar these days. If my husband is on investigation for running a Ponzi scheme, I would be ashamed to show my face in public too," says Chithra, my co-worker.

I cannot help feeling sorry for Sonal. And for Kajal too. No wonder her grades were slipping.

Just then, I hear the final bell. I hurriedly clean my desk. "I see that the kickboxing sessions are paying off," Chithra exclaims, a twinge of jealousy in her voice. "You seem to have lost your double chin!"

I smile and leave the room. I have to go home, get changed and meet Vikki at the

gym. After that, we are going to a movie.

As we hold hands in the cinema hall, for the first time, I send up a silent prayer. Thank you, God. Thank you for giving me Vikki.

Apr 18

I can't believe Ruchi is dying of colon cancer and no one told me! I only learn of it when Reema Aunty calls and tells me that Ruchi wants to talk to me about something.

I cannot believe it is Ruchi at the other end. She sounds defeated and scared, and I realise that the news of impending death must have strange transformative powers. I try to be as nice as possible, especially now that Ruchi is requesting me to have her kids stay at my place a few days every month, when her husband travels for his job. In short, I am to be their legal guardian.

A readymade family! I do not know Ruchi's kids very well – she has seen to that – and I am nervous, but I cannot help being thrilled at the prospect of a house full of children. Somewhere, somehow, the universe has heard my pleas. I promise Ruchi I will do my best.

Apr 25

It has happened. Vikki and I are lovers. And I have never been happier in my life.

Jul 2

Tomorrow is our six months' anniversary. I am so excited. Vikki's gift is inside an envelope in my dresser. Two tickets to Maldives (off season discounted rates, naturally). And a swimsuit for me. All those sessions at the gym paid off!

Sometimes I pinch myself when I face a mirror. I cannot believe that this slim, smiling woman is me. I have Vikki to thank for it. I am going to cook a healthy version of Paella for him tomorrow. He loves Spanish food. And then... I giggle. Shameless, that's what I am. I have even abandoned my faithful journal for more than two months! But not anymore, I vow to myself.

It's a typical day at school, hectic and enjoyable. Kids make the world go around. I touch my tummy... I have always thought it's too late for me to have a child, but with IVF, perhaps it is not hopeless. I wonder what Vikki will think about it...

Chithra and I are coming out of the gate when we see Sonal buying something for Kajal in the shop opposite our campus. I have grown so used to her absence I am stunned to see her. She looks... emaciated.

"My God, what happened to her? She looks so... thin," I say, biting my lip.

Chithra cluck-clucks. "Didn't you hear? Her husband was found not guilty of all those fraud charges. I imagine the last six months must have taken their toll... some consolation, I bet. Talk about silver linings!"

Sonal is buying a great big ice cream cone. Kajal is holding hers, but we are entranced by Sonal. She looks at the ice cream cone in her hand as if it is a snake. After a few seconds, as if she has never seen an ice cream in her life, she starts to wolf it down.

I avert my eyes. It is sadder than anything I have seen in a long time. Chithra comments, "And there it goes!

It took a bloody tragedy to get her to lose weight, but now it's back to pavilion. Some people just don't change."

I do not reply. I am aware of a creeping chill down my spine.

Jul 3

Vikki is not in his apartment. His mobile is switched off and I am going out of my mind. He knew I had planned dinner tonight...

It is so unlike him. He has never been inconsiderate. He would never make me wait like this. And that's why my instincts are jumping all over the place. Where is he?

The phone rings. It is Reema Aunty. "Betiya, it's a miracle!" she cries. "Ruchi does not have cancer, it has totally disappeared from her body! She is healthier and slimmer than ever! Devi Maiyyah, my poojas have not gone in vain!"

The chill returns, to settle firmly on my spine. I am happy for Ruchi, but I dread what I am going to hear from her mother next. I can already guess it.

"Oh, by the way," her tinny voice says, "Ruchi needs your signature to make the guardianship agreement void... so can you drop by today? I have the papers with me. I hope you understand now, betiya, it is not really needed. No, she cannot talk now, she is having her dinner. Chola poori and roast potato curry, her favourite. Oh I never thought I would be cooking for her again! I am sure she will call you in some time."

"Aunty, wait," I say, moistening my dry lips. "Can you... can you tell me exactly when Ruchi learned about her... illness?"

Is there even a person called Vikki? Who – or what – has been making me laugh and cry and rejoice these past six months?

My stomach cramps and I place a shaking, soothing hand on my tummy. I haven't eaten since the day before and I feel weak, rather than ravenous. Still, the ghost of a memory stirs in me. I know there is a big tub of peanut butter in the larder.

Food never fails. It never disappears on you. It will always comfort you, and it will always be there for you. Paella can fly out the window.

Like in a trance, my legs carry me to the kitchen. My hands scoop out peanut

butter and slather it on three, four thick slices of bread. My eyes sight the block of chocolate in the fridge, and I scrape several slivers off it and prepare a frothy, deliciously calorie-ridden chocolate shake.

I arrange the dishes on the table and sit. I remain still for an hour, looking at the pile of bread, the congealing mess of the milkshake and at the empty chair before me.

Some people just never change...

But some do.

I dump everything in the bin. Putting on my sneakers, I glance at my watch. If I hurry, I can still make it to the kickboxing session at the gym.



Reading Hour

short fiction poetry essays reviews



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“Huh... why do you ask, betiya?” she sounds suspicious, but goes on without waiting for my reply. “I will never forget how my daughter called me, crying and screaming on the phone... I thought, what terrible news to hear on the first day of the New Year...”

The next minute, I am running down the road. I am not able to find an auto-rickshaw, so I run all the way to the next street, and hail one. The next hour speeds by, which I hardly register. As soon as the vehicle stops outside the ancient-looking bungalow, I thrust a five hundred rupee note at the bewildered driver and run up the winding stairs of LIGHTER KARMA, past the reception and barge into the inner cubicle.

She is there, as before. Sitting at her desk, looking ethereal in a white saree and gold jewellery, with the laptop before her.

As soon as I see Apsara, my courage disappears. What do I ask her? How do I frame my question?

She makes it easy for me. “I trust that you are happy with the results, Miss P. Are you here to settle the bill?”

My legs weaken and I collapse on the floor. “How could you do this?” I whisper, feeling nauseous. “How could you play with people’s lives like this?”

She is standing before me in a flash. “How could you? How could you defile your own body and stuff it with garbage and end up looking like what you were never, never supposed to? You... humans disgust me,” she snarls and I cower in terror.

“You wreck your body, your beauty, then you look for salvation and pray for

divine help and a magical way to solve all your woes and when you get it, you are back again to complain. Perhaps your salvation too, should have come in the form of a public scandal or some bodily ravage... like colon cancer?” she asks me, her eyebrows arching in mockery.

I whimper at the rage in her beautiful, terrible face and Apsara tut-tutts. “Come now. So what if you had to suffer? You got what you wanted. And you had one of the best experiences of your life so far – widows and abused people always do, their karma points are amazing – and you should be cheering, not crying. Think of my points, to be dealing with you snivelling humans every day,” she grimaces.

The next minute, she is back to normal. “Right. We have given you the results you wanted. Now, would you like to pay by cash or credit card?”

I enter my home, hoping against hope that Vikki might be there. He has a key.

The house is empty, quiet.

I curl up on the two-seater. Scenes from the past six months and six hours flash through my mind, jagged and interlaced with one another. The fried chicken I was digging into when I first saw the ad, that cab ride through the deserted roads of Red Hills, the sound of the head bump when Vikki crashed into me, Ruchi’s tears as we looked at her scan, the cathartic feeling when I pounded on the sand bag at the gym, Sonal’s half-crazed eyes when she looked at that ice cream cone, Apsara’s eerie voice as she lamented her stint on earth, Vikki’s kisses and caresses and delicious, all-encompassing love...

POETRY

Goirick hails from Silchar, Assam. His work has appeared in North East Review, Nether, Pyrta Journal, Raedleaf Poetry, The Hindu, Economic and Political Weekly and others.

The House By The Wooden Bridge At Silcoorie

Goirick Brahmachari

On a winter's day, after class, many of us took the university bus to Silchar.
I took a window seat on the left. The bus moved like a camel,
cradling us, over the broken road that snaked through the hillocks of Dargakona.
The horizon morphed into many shades of amber.

We passed the Dargah, and a stretch of reaped paddy fields
that had turned golden, in dry winter. We passed the naked fields where naked children
played football. The soil, colour of their skin.
We passed the wetlands that lead us to the boats for Chatla.

I remember the lonely brickworks that stood like obelisks in vast red fields – black smoke
oozing out of their heads – slow and lazy – creating clouds and patterns in the sky
as the workers, and the farmers, returned home with their cattle.

A few miles ahead, our bus broke down, so we all got off at the wooden bridge.
We waited there, smoked cigarettes and walked past the tea garden
The breeze was strong for us to hold on and we were hungry
so we searched for some food and some tea.

We found a house by the side of the bridge over a canal that had dried
we learned they sold Shingaras without any spice,

served hot with a yellow Chutney on a plate of dry leaves
from a small house with a green door. A plate of 10,
small, fat triangles made of flour,
filled with boiled peas and unpeeled potato.

So we ate many plates and sipped our cups of tea
and stopped when we were no longer hungry.

When the bus got fixed, and we were done eating, we left for home.

It is said,
much before the Pizzas and the Burgers of Premtala
and before the Momo that became famous at Jhalupara
There has always been Silcoorie's Shingara house.



FICTION

One Day Too Late

Vidya Panicker

Naniamma bends over with the broom of coconut fronds, her ample bosom dancing along with the oscillations of her body and the broom. Dust clouds around and almost engulfs the woman whose dark lips are reddened with the betel juice that she spits out frequently. She collects the dry leaves in a bamboo basket and looks around the front yard. The plants need watering, the cows have to be milked and rice is boiling on the open stove in the backyard.

“Edi Janammo, Ambike, Leelavathi, Parukutty, anyone there?” she shouts.

The four daughters join their mother outside in the courtyard, surprised.

They had not expected their mother to be awake and active so soon in the morning on this particular day.

Naniamma was always an early riser, but today is surely an exception.

It is just a day ago that her husband Govindan died in his sleep and the embers from his pyre are still smoldering. As a mark of mourning, the woman could have afforded herself a day to lie on her bed, pondering over nothing in particular, refusing every morsel of food offered to her, finally relenting for a cup of tea or a bite of boiled tapioca.

But they know that their mother is not

Vidya is a doctoral student in the Indian Institute of Management, Kozhikode. Her poetry has been published in several online journals.

like any other woman.

“What are you girls gaping at?” she barks and orders them to various tasks in the home.

Cursing her girls for spending too much time sleeping, grooming or doing nothing, Naniamma enters the bedroom that until a day ago she had shared with her husband. She is struck afresh by its emptiness, by the absence of the human form that was sprawled on the bed until a day ago.

Naniamma is the color of Bengal grams. She has a fiery physique that maintains itself through household work traditionally meant for men. She has chopped wood, mended the roof, washed and milked cows, built the hen’s coop and raised her children all by herself, while managing the financial transactions of the family with great dexterity.

Today, she has a different task in hand. She is about to erase the final memories of a man who was her husband for more than half a century, yet with whom she managed to make only a handful of pleasant memories. Over the years, Govindan’s presence had shrunk into this tiny rectangular box, which was the room he shared with his wife. Thrice a day, Naniamma ladled rice soup into a ceramic bowl, added a pinch of salt and a

scoop of coconut chutney to it, mixed the contents thoroughly and placed it near his bed. At some point later, he would painfully get up and gulp the contents down. More recently, the plate was often left untouched, until Naniamma removed it to clean it and serve the next meal.

Naniamma begins the purgation process with the cot on which Govindan had lain in the final years of his life, breathing in and out noisily, panting and coughing through the nights. If she moves it to their portico, her three school-going grandnephews who live with her could sleep comfortably on it. It would certainly be an upgrade for them, as they currently slept in a corner of the cowshed, where they spent nights battling mosquitoes, bugs and in a few instances, snakes. She had sat on the cot several times herself, and had slept on it too, in the early days of her marriage to Govindan. That was long ago, very long ago, she remembered.

Naniamma was married within the family at the age of 14, to her aunt's son as per the custom that then existed in her part of the world. Govindan was an incompetent and happy-go-lucky youth who felt no pangs of conscience selling off his young bride's gold and the land he got as dowry within a few months of their marriage to gamble, tour and drink. They settled down in a single room hut near his house, which he got in accordance with being the youngest son of his parents. Every meal was a challenge for Naniamma who depended wholly on her backyard vegetable garden and the generosity of her in-laws who

lived nearby.

In a year, their first child was born, a boy. The infant only had a black thread around his waist during his naming ceremony, instead of the gold chain that the father was expected to put around the child's neck. His father was away at a cattle race wagering the money he got from selling off his wife's last gold bangle. It was at that moment that Naniamma, a barely literate girl in her teens, realized that most of the men she had met in the few years of her life, including her father, brothers, uncles and husband were useless and nonchalant fools who were born with the sole intentions of procreation and recreation. She swore not to let one more of them take over control of her life. Her suspicion even extended to the unknowing infant who had just peed on her lap and momentarily begun to cry due to the discomfort of the moisture. She let him cry for a few minutes to prove that she meant business before getting up to change his diaper cloth.

When Govindan returned a month later, having lost significant amounts of money in the cattle race, and at a temple festival in the neighboring village known for the several card games and similar offerings, envisaging what to sell next, he found his wife a changed woman. She was back at their house, alone with the child. Her parents had half-heartedly asked her to remain longer, until Govindan got back, but she had insisted on returning. The single kerosene-lamp was burning in the portico, but there was no water in the brass tumbler for Govindan to wash his feet and even when he called out to

her, his wife did not come out. He felt no concern though. Women did behave strangely at times; she was feeling too comfortable perhaps, a thrashing should do the trick. He, Govindan, had always remained a calm husband, giving the woman the choice of running the house the way she wanted. Today he would show her who the man of the house was.

Calling his wife a pretentious slut and her mother a calculating demoness, Govindan stepped into their bedroom where Naniamma was then feeding the infant. He cooled down significantly at the sight of Naniamma's bare breasts and decided that punishment could wait. The woman was turning him on with that solid body of hers and breasts which were luscious after childbirth and having been deprived for over a month now, all Govindan wanted was to leap on her. Naniamma did not look up at him and did nothing to acknowledge his presence.

"Deccc," he called out, forcing his words out with as much anger as he could manage but she still sat unmoved, like a formidable, intractable mountain.

It's surprising how human minds can switch between emotions at a moment's notice. How anger is evaporated by lust and how indifference in turn breeds anger. Disregarding the sleeping infant suckling on her lap, Govindan caught hold of a handful of Naniamma's lush dark hair and yanked her from the cot. She hit the floor with a thud, having been taken unawares. The infant, now awake, shrieked out in the shock. Calmly, Naniamma got up, placed the baby on the cot, tied her blouse and turned around to look at her husband. He was red and

shivering in anger, his closed fist holding a dozen or more of the hair strands that he had pulled out of her scalp. He was getting ready to hit her again, but something in her eyes made him stop.

"You are not to touch me again," she said calmly, the underlying menace barely concealed.

Govindan might have been expected to hit her again. He did not. Instead, he shrivelled up near the corner of the room, sat on his haunches and cried the whole night. His wife had suddenly materialized into a woman too much like his mother, who terrorized him. Naniamma's respect and fear of him were the only tools he had against his wife. In those few gentle words she spoke, he was robbed of his manhood and dignity. He wanted Naniamma to pamper and kiss him. He wanted to make love to her. Naniamma ignored the whimpering man that night and for the rest of her life. Thereafter, he did not go out unless extremely necessary and he had no money anyway, because Naniamma no longer handed over to him the proceeds from selling plantain bunches, milk or eggs. He meekly asked her when he need a few rupees for tobacco or arrack and she complied most of the time. He was careful enough to remain in her good books. She lay with him whenever it suited her and only because, like most women before her, she wanted a brood of her own. Naniamma laboured for four more children, all girls. The children were taught the name of their father, but beyond that they never bothered to learn about him or his condition. For them he was a permanent fixture, like the cot he slept on, its sheets

smelling of oil, sweat and tears.

It is this cot that Naniamma sits on today, recalling her days of struggle and solitude. She had often seen the pleading in Govindan's eyes, but he was scared of her, as a little lamb would be of a mighty lioness. Unknown to him, Naniamma craved to respond to him kindly, but she feared that one moment of weakness would destroy the fortress that she had built around her, to protect herself and her family.

When their elder son had died of cholera at the age of 7, Govindan had wept whereas Naniamma had ordered the scavenger to dig a pit deep enough to bury the corpse in the northeast corner of their compound, so that jackals and dogs would not get to it. Grief had settled into her heart like a heavy stone, unwilling to move for a long period of time, during which she ultimately mastered the art of pretending that all was well in life and nothing would change the daily momentum of sowing and reaping.

Naniamma sighs, gets up from the cot and proceeds to drag it out of the room. The future beneficiaries are already excited about the new comfort and silently thanking the Gods for the old man's demise. She tugs the wooden fixture gently. It does not move. She pulls harder. The cot still refuses to nudge. Naniamma keeps trying for the better part of an hour, puffing and panting, yet refusing to call for help. But the cot remains where it was.

In a while, Naniamma realizes that it is not the weight of the bed that is resisting its removal. It is her own heart, unwilling to give strength to her arms.

She deftly moves to her own bed, removes the mattress and woollen blanket from it and yanks it out. Under her powerful arms, the cot moves smoothly. She pushes it out of the room and closes the door.

Naniamma then lies on her dead husband's cot, face down, arms spread. She is sobbing because after almost four decades, she is hugging her husband.



Is that a story languishing in your closet? Dust it off and send it in!

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POETRY

Sudarshan Shidore

Sudarshan is an e-learning professional – an IIT Delhi alumnus who wishes he had enrolled at JNU instead to study literature or philosophy. He lives in Mumbai.

Love In The Time Of Physics

Light does not travel from the observer to the observed, as the ancient Greeks believed, which is why, of course, you cannot see anything in a dark room, even if you tried

If so,
Why is it
That when you look at me, when I am not looking
I feel
A strange glow within?

Exam Time

For a few moments, the world is clean, dry, laundry fresh
Spelt in drying ink on paper
Crackling in consciousness
And issues are straight lines
Without gravity
Light
Or emotion.

And the prize goes to
the man who doesn't look up
Or down –
In fact,
nowhere at all
And scribbles till the gong –
And rectangles, trapeziums and other neat geometrical shapes
Rise
to
Go back to their places
on their hostel chairs
again.



Sreelata enjoys writing about history and the various places she has travelled to. She is a Penguin-Puffin author.

Photographs: Sreelata Menon

ESSAY

Where A Thousand Serpents Bloom

Sreelata Menon

About 15 kms from the main city of Palakad, lies the hamlet of Chittur-Tattamangalam. Flanked by fields of lush green paddy, and dotted with thatched roofs, banana and coconut groves, it is no different from the other many small towns that populate the length and breadth of Kerala. Among its major attractions are a bustling market, a few crisscrossing roads and a couple of pristine clean temples where people gather to celebrate and worship. While many erstwhile Tharavads have given way to modern homes and nuclear families, still nestling among them is the 'Parakkat House' which until recently always housed an elderly grandmother and her progeny.

What, you might ask, is a Tharavad? Tharavads are large joint-family clans that go by specific names, with the eldest male member (Karnavar) at its head. He is greatly respected, and although female elders in the clan – usually his grandmother – may wield massive influence, his word is ultimately law. He is the protector and manager of the clan, its wealth and status. A joint-family that includes everybody on his maternal side, members of a Tharavad cannot marry within the Tharavad. So his own

children would belong to his wife's clan that is looked after by the eldest male member of her own Tharavad. All such Tharavads follow the 'marumakathayam' system of inheritance, which means that inheritance is traditionally through the mother.

While most Indian community members take on their fathers' name or the village name, men and women here carry the name of their maternal Tharavad as initials.

Traditionally every Tharavad, rich or poor, is by choice a single, double storied dwelling with rooms and corridors running round a central open courtyard. In one of these rooms also resides the Kula Devi who is usually a variant of Parvati or a benign Kali.

Large and sprawling, with outhouses and small little temples dedicated to Ganapati, Ayyapan and a Sarpe Kavu (snake-serpent temple) in its compound, the Parakkat Tharavad of royal and noble ancestry enjoys a position of respect and prominence in not only Tattamangalam but among other Tharavads in Kerala too. It has evidently seen better days; presently, all its rooms lie quiet behind locked doors, barring one. And members of the Parakkat House, who despite

having spread their wings far and wide to blaze new trails, often make it a point to call on the only member of the household who still reigns supreme in that one room where she has existed for centuries. She is our Kula Devi – Sri Kanchi Kamakshi Amma.

Dignified by a single hanging lit lamp with a circular fanned mirror on the wall behind to capture its flame Sri Kanchi Kamakshi Amma has for more than seven centuries presided over the life and times of our Parakkat clan. It is said that wherever we are, in whichever corner of the world we might be, in times of strife or otherwise, we just need to light a small oil lamp and think of her, for her to come to our aid. The hanging lamp indicates her ‘challanam’ or travelling form, and its flame – the ‘Kidav Vilaku’ – is never allowed to go out, except for the mandatory mourning period when a Parakkat member dies.

Why Sri Kanchi Kamakshi Amma chose to come to Parakkat House is lost in the mists of time. How she came here is part of Parakkat family lore. One of the Sankaracharyas, it is believed, accompanied by a Parakkat Karnavar, brought her to Parakkat House in the form of a diya (flame) on a many tiered golden umbrella from the main temple of Kanchi Kamakshi Amman in Kanchipuram, Tamilnad (6 CE) some 500 kms away. Hence the Kidav Vilaku worship. And there she has remained since, tended and looked after by the ladies of the household. The manner of worship at Parakkat House used to strictly follow the protocol laid down perhaps

aeons ago and most members try to attend at least one puja (which includes a Sarpe Kave Puja too) sometime during the year when a delicately engraved foot high golden umbrella is brought out to be worshipped along with the replica of the Sri Chakram found in Kanchipuram. But as family members continue to straddle the world and settle thousands of miles away, how long this will carry on is anyone’s guess. Even presently, with no female member living in the house, the lamp is currently tended to by male members who live in other houses nearby.

Naturally, over the centuries, the main Tharavad house must undoubtedly have undergone many a change. The room that houses the Devi too must have been renovated though nobody today quite remembers when. But under the floor below the hanging lamp, we are told, lies enormous wealth. Again this apparently is another unique feature of most Tharavads. And many of us have heard our grandmothers talk about large blood-red rubies and sparkling emeralds that nobody dare touch because coiled among them lies their protector, the King Cobra.

Thereby hangs the genesis of this tale. It has to do with the life and customs of the Nagavanshi Kshatriyas.

Even though you come across them everywhere – in the armed forces, the civil services and every walk of life, who, you might well ask is a Nagavanshi Kshatriya. You see, you only know him or her as the cook, soldier, civil servant or friend with that ubiquitous surname ‘Nair’ or ‘Nayar’ from yes, Kerala. Exotic as it may sound, Nagavanshi Kshatriyas

are therefore merely the Menons, Pannikars and Nambiars and a whole lot of other varied Malayali folk that belong to the Nair community. The ones that you have been bumping into at every turn. The ones who often tell you that they are matriarchal and rush off to their 'ancestral home' for every Vishu and Onam.

Said to be (among other theories too) descendants of the Serpent Kings from the land of the Nagas who fought in the battle of Kurukshetra, 'Nair' is probably the corrupted form of 'Naga'. The Nagas, it is said, incurred the wrath of Parashurama, the sixth of Vishnu's ten incarnations, and he set out to destroy them as indeed, all Kshatriyas, in order to avenge his father's death at the hands of a Kshatriya King. So they fled Kurukshetra after the war and moved further down to the hills of Uttar Pradesh near Nainital. But they continued to be warriors.

Cut to the 2nd century BC when the

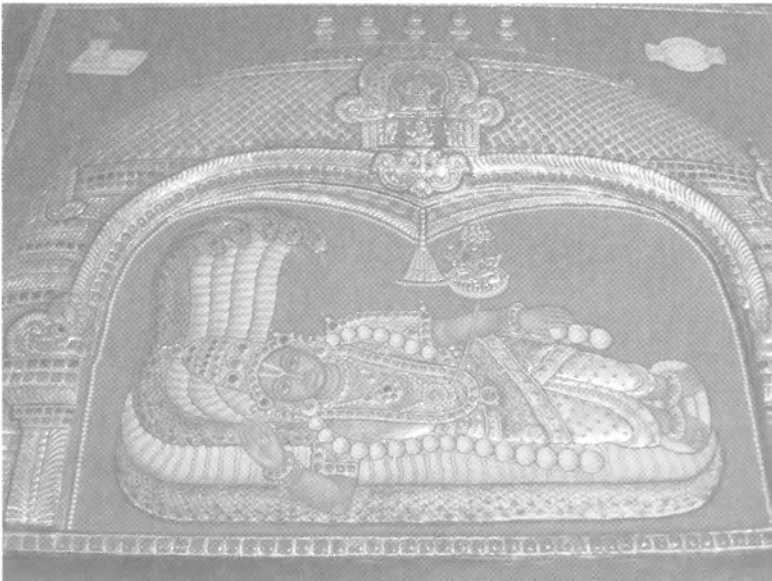
Scythians (Sakas) invaded the north. These Naga Kshatriyas, while retaining some of their serpent origins, were among those who soon adopted Scythian customs including polyandry and matriarchy. In due course, they moved to today's Karnataka at the invitation of the Raja of Kadamba (345 AD) who wanted a strong fighting force. They spread even further to Calicut, Cochin and Travancore and have remained there as part of the militia and the landed gentry with strong royal and noble lineages, till the present Dubai influence of course.

It is ironic that they settled in a place that was carved out of the sea by the axe of the same Parashurama who had forced them to flee in the first place.

In fact Mannarshala near Alleppy is famous for its snake temple run by elderly high priestesses that can actually trace its origins to the Nagas of the Mahabharata. The other is the Pambe Mev Kave Mana near Thrissur. A further example

of the powerful influence of the serpent dynasty over the Nairs is at the Padmanabha Swamy temple where Vishnu is in the 'ananta shayanam' pose – lying on a serpent. 'Ananta' being one of the serpent kings.

But unfortunately for the Nairs, the



British, when they swallowed India didn't take too kindly to the Nair Military Brigade (of erstwhile Travancore and Malabar) who frequently threatened their rule. So with legislations that were demeaning the British sought to rid them of their identity as brave soldiers. They banned their right to carry weapons and train in military warfare. Stripped of what was integral to them, the Nairs began to lose their dominance as Kshatriyas. Since they were not native to Kerala, they were not well-established in the Varna (caste system), and there was a time when they were looked down upon by much of the original populace. Though classified as a martial race they never regained their pre-Brahmin and pre-British era eminence even after independence, as land reforms and tenancy legislations reduced many powerful noble Nair families to poverty. But most of their social mores continued to hold strong despite being absorbed into the common Hindu legal fabric of the country.

Therefore we – the Nairs – have customs that are unique to us. In fact we have even been described as a tribe. The Nairs don't subscribe to the Hindu family notion of patriarchy at all. With our Tharavads, our Kula Devis, our serpent worship and our Marumakathayam norms we are strongly and unabashedly matrilineal. To be fair, the Jats, Rajputs, Bunts and others have also all laid claim



Naga Kavu

to the Nagavanshi heritage. Then there are also those who say that it is all a myth.

In general, most prominent Nair Tharavads own large estates, houses and even temples depending on their wealth, which is usually from paddy, rubber, coconut or cashew. But large or small, they all have something in common – the 'Sarpe Kave', and next to it, a well defined pond for bathing. Worship of the Naga Devata is traditionally a part of every Nair household even today. Long considered a benefactor of barren women, the Naga Devata is seen as one who is a panacea for all diseases as well. Hence life in a Nair Tharavad revolves round not only the female members of the family and its Kula Devi but also the welfare of its Naga Devata.

Is it any wonder that its Kula Devi and wealth – including that at Parakkat House – is guarded and protected by King Cobras?

May a thousand serpents bloom.

FICTION

Adreyo hails from Kolkata. He is currently pursuing an MFA at Stonybrook, Southampton.

Sinbad

Adreyo Sen

In recent years, I've hardly met my sister. This isn't to say that we are not close. In fact, we are perhaps closer than ever before, certainly closer than we were as children.

Growing up, I was often impatient with my sister. She was two years younger than me and I suppose I wanted to mould her in my image. I was the sort of girl who rushed everywhere with a long mental checklist of goals, the sort of child who stockpiled certificates and medals, but was never content to rest upon her laurels. I suppose I was vain, perhaps a bit too pleased with myself.

My sister didn't have ambitions. She had passions, passions she adopted and discarded without a moment's notice. For all of two months, she was in love with Lego bricks and our mother bought her several sets. And soon after, they began to accumulate dust.

Perhaps one of the reasons I resented my sister was that my mother seemed to prefer her. Early on, their roles were reversed and my mother's tired eyes would shed their shadows to the slow cadences of my sister's fairy tales.

My sister, living in her own head, was a wonderful writer. But she wrote for pleasure and quietly rejected any attempts to make her publish something.

She wasn't competitive. In fact, she feared distressing her friends by showing them up. I remember her masking her talent at singing so that one of our mutual friends could shine.

"You're no good," he'd jeered at her and she'd looked back silently.

But when I'd tried to scold her about this dishonesty, she had looked at me as if I were the enemy, her eyes filling up with their easy tears.

Nowadays, I generally see my sister twice a year. She stops at Delhi on her way to Dehra Dun to pick up her children from boarding school. She stays with me for a couple of days and lets me take her around the city, even though she is bored by anything not circumscribed by book covers.

I never tire of asking her, "So Sinbad still comes to see you?"

Invariably, she smiles.

"I suspect," she told me once, "That I am a child in many ways. That's why I can still see her."

"You mean she's Peter Pan," I wanted to say, but held my tongue.

My sister glowed. Her marriage was very happy, even if her husband couldn't resist imbuing his protagonists with her wistful otherworldliness.

My sister first mentioned Sinbad on her thirteenth birthday. I was looking through her things, ostensibly in search of a pencil, but really so I could inspect her notebooks – she was always being pulled up in school on account of not doing her homework. And then I came upon a lovely red fountain pen. It was a Parker pen and I knew it was very expensive.

“Who gave you this?” I asked her, “Where did you find it?”

“Sinbad gave it me,” she said.

“Gave it to me,” I said, “Try speaking correct English. You are a thief, you wicked girl. Who’s this Sinbad anyway?”

She began to cry.

“Sinbad gave it me,” she wailed.

That evening, she disobeyed me and went down to play with the other children who lived in the apartment blocks.

I wanted to teach her a lesson.

And so I told the other children, “I wouldn’t play with her if I were you. She’s a thief.”

You know how keen children are to capitalize on difference. And so the children pretended to flee from her.

“Thief, thief,” they chanted as she tried to approach them.

She turned on me.

“Why are you so mean to me?” she yelled.

“Don’t be dramatic, thief,” I said, quelling a sudden stab of guilt.

“I need to talk to you,” I said to Mummy when she came home.

Mummy looked more tired than ever, perhaps having dropped in at the hospital to see Nana on the way home. But I felt

she had to know.

“Anju, come here,” she said, when I had finished, “Show me the fountain pen.”

“Sinbad gave it me,” protested my sister.

“She’s only a fairy tale character,” said my mother, “I know you remember the stories I told you about her.”

When Mummy still told us bedtime stories, she would include these silly stories about a little girl, a very little girl, who was very old in years, and who traversed the world through walls and handbags, bringing gifts to the deserving.

“Today,” she would say, a hand on Anju’s forehead, “Sinbad crawled through the wall of a palace and went to spend Children’s Day with the orphans of Kashmir.”

Or, “Today Sinbad crept through a carpet and went to watch the Bihu dance in Assam.”

“But it was exactly like in your stories,” Anju protested, “Sinbad came through the wall and sat on my pillow. She let me pet her and then she gave me the pen. She said it was to inspire me to write.”

“Inspire, you mean,” I couldn’t help saying.

“Enough,” said my mother. It was me she was looking at and I noticed that she was very pale.

The next evening, my sister wasn’t waiting for me by the school gate. I rushed to the Principal’s Office.

“Your sister’s normally so cheerful,” the secretary said, “Today she was looking really upset. I asked your Mummy to take her home.”

A wave of anger went through me.

How could Anju be so inconsiderate? She knew how tired Mummy was these days.

When I got home, I found Anju tightly enfolded in Mummy's arms.

"It's all your fault, Mom," she sobbed, "When Sinbad came to see me, I told her she had got me in trouble. I said I didn't want to see her ever again. And now I've lost her!"

"How dare you trouble Mummy like this?" I yelled at her. She looked at me furiously.

"Enough," said Mummy, "Anju, baby, sleep in my room tonight. I haven't talked to you properly for ages. We need to catch up."

What about me, I wanted to say, I've barely been able to speak to you for the last year. You're only home late at night.

But I held my tongue.

When I woke up the next morning and went to the living room, Mummy was singing over the stove as Anju watched her.

It had been a while since I'd heard her sing and when she turned to look at me, her face looked so much happier.

I ran to her and buried my face in her nightie as she held me.

"Mummy, what happened?" I said, "You look beautiful!"

"It was Sinbad," she said happily, "She gave me an apple. It must have been from the Fountain of Youth! Isn't that an idea, Anju?"

I was shocked.

"Don't encourage Anju to tell tales," I said, "She's silly enough as it is."

Mummy's expression didn't change.

She placed pancakes and toast on the table.

"Sometimes, Dia," she said, "There is magic in this world. You just have to be able to see it. I was wrong not to believe Anju yesterday. You see it's been so long since Sinbad came to see me last that I thought she'd only been a lovely dream."

"Mom!" I protested but she drew me close and kissed the top of my head.

In the days that followed, Mummy continued to work till late. She was often tired, but it was no longer a fatigue that consumed her, the fatigue that had cast a shadow on her face ever since Papa died.

If there was magic in the world, it seemed to have annexed Mummy. She laughed and she laughed often, usually while playing with Anju. They were both like little children.

And then Nana was released from the hospital and she swept back into our lives, fussing over Mummy and taking over the daily running of our household. We were a family once again.

When Anju was eighteen, she went to college in the USA. Mummy missed her terribly and soon went to join her.

I attended college in Delhi and Nana watched over me. She was my best friend and in Mummy's absence, my unfailingly patient advisor. I married early and settled into a comfortable career. Both my husband and I teach at Delhi University.

Anju married a full six years after me, head-over-heels in love with a laconic writer only animated to laughter by her

stream of nonsense.

Mummy died two years ago and Anju brought her ashes home so that we could scatter them over the river that was her namesake and in whose waters she had swum in her youth.

Late this August, my only child left home for a college in the USA. She is a good girl and calls me regularly, but she is impatient on the phone. She has a full life now in Chicago and I suppose my anxious questions keep her from plunging right back into it.

My husband and I often find ourselves haunting her room. We've kept it the way it was on her last night with us, even though we fear this absence will soon become a permanent one. I take down her trophies and browse the cabinet full of books she bought with her prize money.

Sometimes I wish Dia Anjali was less like me and more like her grandmother and her aunt – she's always so serious, so

apt to ignore all that makes life beautiful.

Last night, when I went to my daughter's room – my husband was fast asleep by then - there was a little child on her table. A very serious child in a blue t-shirt and black jeans.

When she saw me, she frowned severely. And then she dived into the open dictionary and disappeared.

When I rushed over, I found a picture lying atop the dictionary's pages.

It was a picture of my daughter. It must have been taken on the night of Holi, my daughter had mentioned taking part in the university celebrations.

Magnificently beautiful in a long sequined skirt and bodice, her eyes bright with amusement, she looked so much like Mummy, so much like the sister I'm now so close to.

With a trembling hand, I dialled my sister's number.

I knew it was the early hours of the afternoon for her.

"Anju, I've just seen Sinbad," I told her.



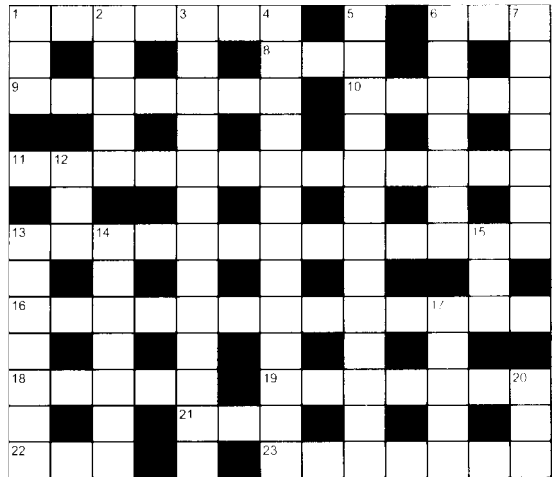
"And at other times when Kellyanne held out Pobby and Dingan were real I would just sit there saying, "Are not. Are not. Are not," until she got bored of saying, "Are. Are. Are," and went running out screaming with her hands over her ears. And many times I've wanted to kill Pobby and Dingan, I don't mind saying it."

~ Ben Rice, Pobby and Dingan

LIGHT STUFF

Across

1. One enters factories for expressions of dissatisfaction (7)
6. Parties back clump! (3)
8. Weapon found among tax evaders (3)
9. Time correct somewhat for one who adjusts (7)
10. Scan one page it contains rule (5)
11. Arrives with girl, bright one, to find shared things (13)
13. Short girl's try completely unpleasantly (13)
16. Actually creeps somehow without direction, wonderfully! (13)
18. Last airway provides way up or down (5)
19. Shadow of some church journo exploited (7)
21. Unwell girl skips beginning (3)
22. Symbol of peace partly female (3)
23. Yak eats minced mash for cover (7)



Down

1. The vegetable that gave the princess sleepless nights (3)
2. Mixed up Marla gives wake up call (5)
3. Rob train ie act strangely as oxidising organisms (13)
4. Friend follows right into South African players in charge, mockingly (13)
5. Allow it somehow, sateity with no loss for lying (13)
6. Tree holds a French lady for telling the time (7)
7. Twice heard spiteful tribe (7)
12. Little robin provides sash for waist (3)
13. Acted holding girl without one idle (7)
14. Spot leaf for bleeding (7)
15. Behold left, amused on social media (3)
17. Sun God leads man with name (5)
20. Post bungalow (3)

Solution: Page 56

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If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen!

I was reminded of this quote attributed to Harry S Truman on a recent afternoon in Bangalore. As the rains outside cooled down the air, inside the kitchen of 'Something's Cooking' the temperature was hotting up. 36 participants formed into teams were rushing to finish their dishes within the allotted time. Another cooking contest? Yes, but one with a difference.

Ashoka's 'Nourishing Schools' project, The Akshaya Patra Foundation's mid-day meal programme and Something's Cooking studio were hosting a Cookathon – a 48 hour challenge for cooking enthusiasts to come up with nutritious, simple recipes using local ingredients that could be part of the school mid day meal program. And all at a cost of around five rupees per child!

In the run up to the Cookathon, the participants came up with over 60 recipes, and this afternoon was reserved for the final cook off. Each team had to come up with a meal that met the criteria and then put it to the test. A panel comprising Ms. Vijayalakshmi, Assistant Director, Mid-Day Meal Scheme Karnataka, Mr. Madan, Chief Operating Officer of The Akshaya Patra Foundation, Chef Rajesh of MTR Foods and consultant nutritionist Ms. Sunetra Roday, marked each dish on multiple parameters, including nutrition, portion size, use of local ingredients and taste. But that wasn't all! Six children from nearby government and private schools

were also part of the judges' panel.

And which were the dishes that were loved the most and which region where they inspired by? Ragi Laddoo (from Bellary), Brahmi rice (from Dakshin Kannada), Pumpkin Chutney (from Bidar) and Beetroot banana dessert (from Coorg).

Organic farmers K Kallappa and his wife Sumangala from Bellary who came up with the Ragi Laddoo (made out of sprouted ragi, moong, wheat and jaggery) said, "We were informed about this by an NGO that operates in our area. And it has been an educational experience for us as well. The whole aspect of measuring ingredients and working towards a target cost was new for us. But throughout we kept in mind our understanding of traditional nutritious ingredients and what would satisfy a child's palate to come up with this recipe."

Mr. Madan talked about some of the challenges Akshaya Patra faces in cooking and providing around 1.4 million mid-day meals every day, the largest such exercise in the world (their 2 billionth meal will be served by mid-2015). He mentioned their vision of reaching 5 million meals per day by 2020. Maintaining costs means they must procure from source. An additional challenge is to keep the children interested in the meal by avoiding repetition and monotony, while meeting the nutritional guidelines.

Given these constraints, he felt that several of the recipes developed during the Cookathon had the potential to be



Above: Participants
Top right and right: Panel of judges



adopted in the centralised kitchens of Akshaya Patra. The Ragi Laddoo, he admits, might need some modification in form, maybe a porridge consistency, since no Laddoo making machines would currently cater to the kind of volumes under consideration.

Speaking of the Cookathon, Satish Venkatachaliah, founder of Something's Cooking says, "It is sad that we have lost out on some of the nutritious food we enjoyed as kids. I remember, as children, we enjoyed chutneys made from drumstick leaves, leaves of the cowpea, and the leaves of root vegetables like radish. These leaves are very nutritious, supplying a far greater proportion of the calcium, iron and minerals requirement than the staple spinach and fenugreek we

see today.

But these are unused nowadays and usually discarded." The Cookathon rediscovered some of these and other traditional ingredients like millets, brahmi, jaggery – it was a 'no sugar' kitchen – and so on while keeping mid-day meals affordable, nutritious and interesting for children.

As for the children on the panel of judges, they tasted all the entries with enthusiasm and marked their scorecards in all earnestness. To nobody's surprise, their favourite coincided with that of the other panel – they loved the Ragi Laddoo from Bellary!

POETRY

Unbreakable

Richa Wahi

Richa freelances as a creative writing teacher. She is committed to introducing children and adults to the joys of writing. Her short stories and poems have been published in India and abroad.

I have reconciled myself
To a terrifying fact –
That my heart is a bubble gum.
You can CHEW it,
And you can s---t---r---e---t---c---h it,
Then sp---l---t it,
And StAmP it,
But it will not break.
Damn!

In its new amoeba like avatar
It will continue to pump, and heal.
Only, you don't know it.

So, as you sit, letting your cigarette smoke
Mimic the snake charmer's rope
I watch, wondering, how did it turn elastic?
While your words form bubbles that float
Between us.
We say so much of nothing.
Your eyebrows knit together
Reminding me of a frayed muffler
I once made for a doll.

Will I miss you, I ask myself
Yes, yes, yes.
Will I miss him, I ask my heart
Yes, yes, yes.
Then break a little, I plead
A tiny tear to let me know
That what he says isn't true
That I really did love him.

But all my heart can do is
BANG against my chest
Inflate, deflate
Change shape
But damn,
It won't break.



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FICTION

Jayaram started writing early but then life took over. Having recently retired, and back in his hometown in Kerala, he is now trying to make up for lost time.

Please Clean My Room

Jayaram Vengayil

When we pass a hotel guest in the corridor we are expected to hold eye contact only for the time required to greet them. Anything longer or lesser is deemed impolite. The lady who brushed past me that evening caught my eye just for a second. The mechanical greeting and smile had barely left my face than she disappeared into one of the rooms in the turning towards the elevator. But her fragrance lingered on, trapped in the airless aisle. Or should I call it her smell? Because it was something more visceral than perfume, the openly arrogant odour of a woman who knew herself. And it smelt very familiar. But I have not known too many who smelt like that, rather just one.

She is only a memory of a smell; I hardly remember how she looked or sounded. It wasn't all that long ago. Seventeen years. But a lot has happened to me since then and I have never set eyes on her or heard her voice after that. Every now and then, however, I am reminded of her smell. When I've entered a room to clean up, I've sometimes smelt something similar. In the unmade beds, the used towels, on the handles of tea cups, on recently used toothbrushes. But most often, it was just the smell of families, unthreatening, familiar and boring, or the smell of men

going about their business, on some boring work trip, possibly sneaking some pleasure on the side. The plastic smell of smartphones and laptop bags.

But this smell was not so common. Possibly, it was because such women didn't visit this sort of town, a tourist location with a few businesses thrown in, businesses which, started in the times of a now extinct tax break, were struggling to survive. Where must they be living then? In tiny, lonely apartments in bustling cities, working for organisations that did little-known things, and visiting art galleries or intellectual coffee shops for leisure. Sure of themselves, but still on an edge, never taking a holiday, never letting go all their lives. Not going to resort towns with their families to catch up on bonding, sun and sea.

I have been at this hotel, in this country that is not mine, for fifteen years now. I came here in search of a job to fund my education. She was the one who sent me on the journey. You must find your own way, alone in an unknown place and use the money to lift your life up, she said. Up from this deep-rooted middle-class smugness that cocoons our existence.

Money, they say, was to be made easily where there are tourists, vice and

anonymity. But no such thing happened with me. I found a job as a cleaner at the lone hotel in town then. Noble intentions long forgotten, making my way up the housekeeping department I was now head housekeeper. While I supervised the other staff, it was my responsibility to clean the suites myself. I loved doing this, people in suites left more things behind, they also tipped liberally. Perhaps it was the absent-mindedness that comes from having too many important things on one's mind combined with a vague guilt that all this was not really theirs to enjoy.

Initially, I had stayed in touch. But it was easy in the days before the internet and mobile phones, to leave one's past behind. At airports, in old addresses, in torn up letters in dustbins. There was another cleaner from my place who would bring news of home whenever he went on annual leave. But I had never dared to ask him for news of her. Probably she'd sent me away because it couldn't go on anymore. She must be lost somewhere by now, but not someone's wife because she could never be that. Perhaps working in some organisation running obscure activities to do with improving the world, sitting in coffee shops talking about impossible things as if time had stood still from the days we spent together. I must be a distant memory by now. But she must be curious enough to keep googling for me or scouring social media for traces of my existence once in a while. And perhaps oddly relieved that the only results the search threw up was a B grade actor by the same name and some innocuous college boy whose parents

had probably named him after the actor. Thus far, I have resisted the urge to search for her and this is easy as I don't own either a computer or a smartphone. And there are probably thousands by her name in the online world; having an ordinary name has its advantages.

The next day, I couldn't stop myself from going up to the floor where I had seen the woman fleetingly. I had resisted the urge to check at the front office if her name was listed as a guest on that floor. Not finding it would be a disappointment as this could only mean that she was with someone else. Finding it would mean I could easily avoid meeting her, after all a guest doesn't stay that long. Those rooms were suites so I would have to go in anyway by noon to clean them up. I hoped she wouldn't be in the room when I knocked. The thought of seeing her again or of discovering that it wasn't her were both equally distressing. I couldn't wait for it to be time to do my rounds on that floor. Dread and anticipation gripped me in equal measure, I asked the boy who assisted me to do another floor so that I could be alone. It could only be one of three suites in the corner. The first one didn't have anyone inside. As there was no notification to clean the room I entered gingerly after my knock yielded no response. This room seemed to have a noisy family with pre-teen kids in it. While one of the beds had two small depressions in it where the kids had slept, the other one was crumpled enough to show that it had been the scene of hurried and discreet nocturnal activity. I did the bedroom quickly, rushed through

the rest of it and made my way to the next suite.

A woman's voice responded from inside when I knocked and my blood raced. The door opened, a face peered out and though I couldn't see much, I could sense, from years of seeing faces peering from behind doors, that she was scantily dressed. She seemed a big woman, probably an executive or an auditor visiting one of the factories in the industrial area. I was relieved. She smiled and I quickly withdrew with a mumbled apology.

It had to be the third room then. My temples throbbed as I approached the closed door. I saw the familiar sign that said dispassionately, 'Please clean my room'. I used the pass key half expecting it not to work. The room was silent as if no one had used it. People leave behind sounds and smells in the room though you can't see them. And then it hit me. The smell. It was everywhere, subtle and unobtrusive but for someone to whom it had been an intimate part of life, I knew it was her. I looked around the room. There was nothing to clean, the bed had not been slept in, and the bathroom was unused. The cupboard was locked and the key missing. I could see an unopened suitcase inside it through the grille. I let my nostrils absorb the odour and breathing out softly and deeply, I left. It was a relief to be outside and free of the smell. Pushing my trolley, I took the elevator to the next floor.

I was restless all day. After finishing my shift I went down to reception to check if the occupant of the room was back.

The receptionist looked at me curiously and said, 'She seems to have left. Didn't check out though. But she'd paid fully in advance. So it's alright. Do you want to do the room?' I could barely hear myself murmur, 'yes'.

I approached the room stealthily, as if expecting someone to stop me. The 'Please clean my room' sign still hung limply. Opening the door, I sensed the smell had somehow vanished. Maybe time dulls the senses. Peering through the cupboard grille I could see the suitcase was still inside. I hurried to the storeroom to get a hammer. A knock on the handle with it and the door fell open. It was an ordinary suitcase, much like the thousands of anonymous ones used by travellers all over the world, which do not betray anything about their owners. I picked it up and walked quickly to my room in the staff quarters. I don't know why but I took the 'Please clean my room' sign with me. Leaving it behind seemed inexplicably like an act of betrayal.

I put the suitcase down and looked at it. It shouldn't be hard to open, with the hammer that I had brought with me. As my heart was still beating hard and I was sweating all over, I lay down on the bed to calm my breath.

I have been living in this room for fifteen years. The hotel had been renovated twice in that period but they hadn't touched the staff quarters. I looked around the room. It didn't contain anything I had brought with me when I first came, or things I bought when I set myself up here. It was, in fact, full of other people's things. I don't know

when it started. I hadn't noticed when I began collecting things left behind by people who vacated their rooms. It began with small stuff, typically toiletries, some of it pretty exotic, especially when the people were from faraway places like South America or Scandinavia. But not anymore, increasingly everything was getting to be the same and we could also get most of it here.

Then I started consciously keeping a look out for things left behind. There were times in the holiday season when I bagged prize catches like souvenirs or clothes. I opened my cupboard, it was full of children's clothes and there was even some nice lingerie. I wonder what anyone from the hotel would think if they saw my room. They would probably think I was crazy or just laugh it off as a harmless habit. For me, I just wanted to be a part of people's lives, things they had used told me stories about them and I didn't feel alone in this room anymore. Anyway these were things they left behind and most of them were worthless, except perhaps some watches and mobile phones. Valuables and money were always in the suite safe and the safe was always empty.

I looked at the closed suitcase lying mute in the middle of the room. I felt a strange attachment to it. I ran my hands over it and smelt my fingers. It was unmistakable. I picked up the hammer and broke the lock, inexplicably almost knowing what to expect. Opening it tremulously, I froze when I saw the handwriting on a half folded note inside, lying pinned to a bundle wrapped in newspapers. My heart raced as I read the note. It couldn't be, I said to myself, I couldn't have been so mistaken after all.

I was about to unwrap the bundle but stopped myself. I went to the door of the room and looked both ways along the corridor, there was no one. The 'Please clean my room' sign which I had brought along from the suite was on the table. I took that and the hammer. Hanging the sign on the door handle, I left the hammer on the floor outside. Then shut the door and locked it before heading for the suitcase.

I tore the note into shreds without reading it again. Then sat down to write on a clean sheet of paper. I hope they see the sign and clean my room up in the morning. They needn't even go in search of a hammer to break in. It is right there.

"Why do people have to be this lonely? What's the point of it all? Millions of people in this world, all of them yearning, looking to others to satisfy them, yet isolating themselves. Why? Was the earth put here just to nourish human loneliness?"

~ Haruki Murakami, *Sputnik Sweetheart*

POETRY

Ankush is a mental health professional. His first collection of poetry, *An Essence of Eternity* (Sahitya Akademi, Delhi) is to be published later this year.

I Learnt Guilt From A Packet Of Lentils

Ankush Banerjee

I learnt guilt from a packet of lentils. I was
young, too young then. My sister
and I played at being angels and demons, near
a pile of groceries. She was Gabriel, I preferred
one of our Hindu Gods.
I was Shiva, trident in one hand, ready
to vanquish the beast that
was almost there, hiding, behind
the table, or above the almirah roof
where we couldn't reach, but our voices
always echoed back
Gabriel used her magic, while my hand
struck thunder. That packet of lentils rolls,
tumbles, crashes like a vanquished demon:
its stomach torn, its yellow remnants
quicksand on floor
'Who did it?' mother strides in, angry,
weather-beaten,
the real mock-goddess of our play –
'She did!' unthinkingly I point at her.
Gabriel's gazelle-eyes are fixed on me.
They melt.
I should have burnt the house
I lived in.

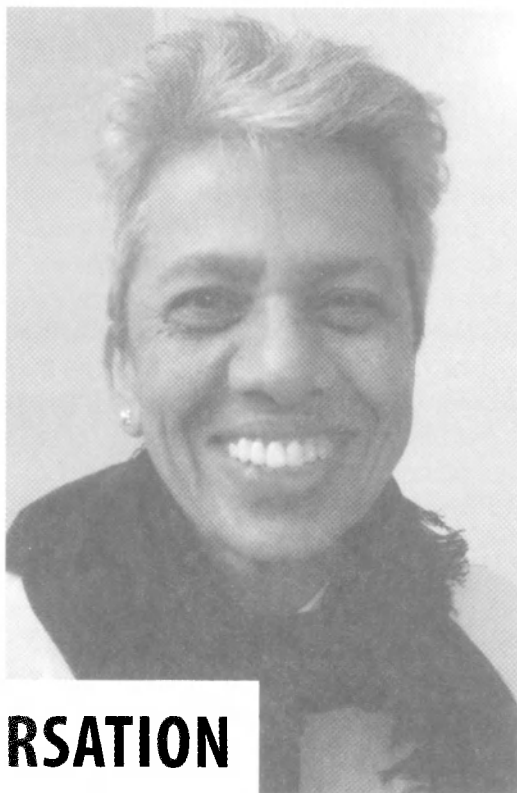


C K MEENA

Novelist, journalist, teacher, newspaper columnist and happy lurker of Bangalore streets

C K Meena, or CK, as she is popularly called, came to Bangalore in 1978, purportedly to do her MA Eng. Lit., but in actuality to make a bid for freedom. She never moved back to Kerala and is now among the many who remain permanently seduced by this city.

She has 3 novels to her credit: 'Black Lentil Doughnuts' (2005), 'Dreams for the Dying' (2008), and 'Seven Days to Somewhere' (2012), all published by Dronequill, with a fourth one in the oven.



IN CONVERSATION

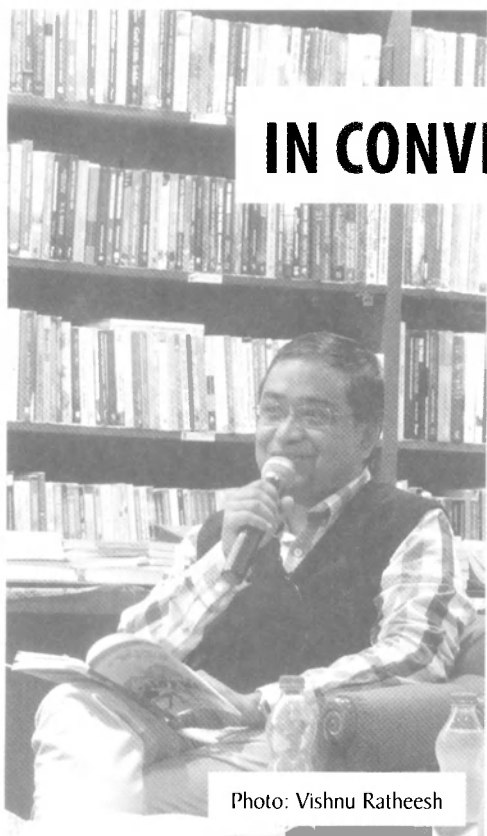


Photo: Vishnu Ratheesh

NILANJAN P CHOUDHURY

Nilanjan is an alumnus of IIT Kanpur and IIM Ahmedabad. He works in the software industry in Bangalore. He claims that he took to writing on account of having the "motive, means and opportunity" – a desire to write, a recession and a long commute. His first book was 'Bali and the Ocean of Milk', which was well received and his second, which is also the first in the Chatterjee Institute of Detection series, is 'The Case of the Secretive Sister'.

Nilanjan is a keen theatre enthusiast – he has written a full-length play 'The Square Root of a Sonnet' and also regularly directs and acts in plays.

On writing your first book and the influence of market trends...

NC: I started *Bali* much before the big wave of mythological 'retellings' hit the market. I wanted to do a black comedy and this book happened. It is a 're-imagined' story, not merely a retelling.

CK: My first book, as the cliché goes, was dictated largely by my own experiences. I cannot write to a trend, or do sequels on demand either... it's really what grabs you at a particular moment. I wanted to try a detective story after my first novel, so I did. The third book was again different, though people expected another detective story.

Being the Other / Outsider and how it influences writing...

NC: The 'outsider' feeling is known to me – I grew up in Shillong and we were called 'Dakars' (outsiders) because of the anti non-tribal movement then.

I think Bangalore's the most 'American' of our cities! Having spent a considerable part of my life in the east and the north, I find Bangalore very accepting of all communities, even easily identifiable ethnicities. It's like a pub, the 'chill' factor is significantly high here!

CK: Well, there has been conflict here too, over Cauvery water, or language. At such times you wonder: who is an insider and who is an outsider? There can be so many points of 'unbelonging' – religion, language, appearance, region...

A group of LGBT friends called me to Koshy's – there was a gay character in *Black Lentil* and they wanted to know, was

it inspired by so-and-so?! All of them bought the book even though that wasn't its focus but it was about not belonging and that is also a kind of not belonging. It was written at a time when the movement had not really picked up steam.

NC: One set of people who find it extremely difficult to 'belong' here are the parents of young working couples! This in fact becomes Detective Choudhury's motivation – he doesn't know what to do with his life; he is a complete outsider. So he decides to engage with people.

Secretive Sister was thus inspired by my mother-in-law and my uncle and people in the local elders' club – they have just given up, just like the younger lot who don't really engage with the city. Life revolves around work, shopping, apartment, school... do you really need to engage? Well, you might have a more meaningful stay here if you do.

From an idea to a novel...

CK: My first book, I didn't know it would be a novel. It started with the personal. When characters entered, they were you, not-you, parts-of-you, bits-of-others... slowly a story emerged. Voices become characters, and more voices emerged and more characters. My first book had 3 drafts, each vastly different.

The second one was more planned – I had the germ of an idea, and I'd always wanted to try it out, a murder mystery. I had to structure it right from the beginning. I knew the end but as I went along there were changes. Sometimes as you write you catch yourself by surprise!

NC: Yes. You see a tiny little shoot

sticking out of the ground and you think gosh, that looks interesting and you dig, and it turns out to be the skeleton of a dinosaur! For *Bali* the basic idea was 'sagar manthan', and then I begin to think of what could have gone before and after. The second book – there was an idea, and also the personal experience of trying to get my daughter into school!

The great fun is in not planning and plotting too much. It's magical when things just start happening – you write a line or two introducing a character and before you know it that character has a life. In *Bali*, a servant girl came in for one scene's requirement and became the 6th most important character in the book! In *Secretive Sister*, the episode at Coffee Day with street spy Manjunath came out of the blue.

CK: You know, your theatre background is visible in your dialogues – I can really 'hear' your characters speak...

NC: I started writing because of theatre, my first and continuing love. I think in terms of scenes – some readers have mentioned a visual quality to my books and I actually do see pictures as I write.

CK: When one book is over – I decide I won't think of writing for a while, and then on a sudden, an idea flashes. Something somebody says sparks it off. It combines with something in my head, and I think, could that be the next one? And I open a new file.

With *Black Lentil* I wasn't doing chapters, I was telling a story. Characters came in, then background and plot, and the file expanded. For *Dreams* I had to plot a lot before the writing could start.

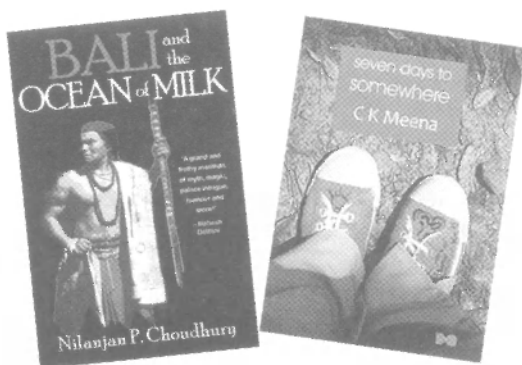
For *Seven Days*, I was thinking about these schoolchildren killing themselves, and then I heard of a parakeet who had befriended a Mumbai family. I knew that the boy wants to kill himself – so what stops him? And I thought yes, parakeet Po. My friends commented that this was just my own madness, a parakeet, of all things, telling stories – probably it was my unconscious unbound by a parakeet! If I was writing for a market, it would have been young adult fiction – YA. But Po tells adult stories. Stories about people who are far removed from the child's world.

My second book I'd titled 'The Weekend Wife' which was shot down. The publishers said it sounded like 'Mallu porn'...

NC: If you'd only subtitled it so, it would have sold 200,000 copies!

I took 18-20 months to write *Bali*, and that while doing a day job (I have to confess I have been lucky with my employers). My wife and a close friend usually read my first draft.

CK: *Black Lentil*, I wrote only in the 3-month college breaks; I was teaching back then. The writing was concentrated into that time – I skipped



administrative duties on leave-without-pay and wrote, morning to night, it was just great! *Dreams* took 3 years, though by then I'd stopped teaching. Close friends read early drafts. My husband deliberately doesn't.

The detective fiction genre... parallels,
influences and demands

NC: My friends asked me if Feluda – my most favourite Indian detective – was the inspiration for Mr Choudhury, but actually it was Jatayu, Feluda's sidekick. Mr Choudhury is my idea of the detective Jatayu would be. Father Brown is a top favourite too.

CK: One immediately sees the parallel with McCall Smith; the ordinary nature of the crime, life's every day little mysteries. That's the charm of *Secretive Sister*.

NC: Well, a murder mystery today, the amount of premeditation it entails is significantly high! I plotted all manner of exotic murders that never led anywhere. If you combine Christie, Father Brown and Holmes, between them they've done it all! It is so difficult to find a murder that hasn't been done yet. Although some might say that it's the telling that really matters, I didn't feel good about recycling an obscure short story by some old stalwart of the genre.

CK: *Dreams* was really a whydunit because right away the reader knows whodunit. I got into the head of the victim and started exploring relationships – then *those* people became characters, and motives emerged. I enjoyed throwing in the red herrings and the twists.

NC: There was this novel called *Suspect*

X – everybody and the reader knows that the wife has killed the husband. But her neighbour, who is in love with her, he says, I will manage your problem. And he does it – and the way he does it is simply superb! Then there's *Gone Girl*. It's not detective fiction, strictly speaking, but brilliantly done crime – and the language! Once in a while you come across such a book and you think, just as well leave it to them, what is the point!

Indian writing in English...

CK: Ever since I was a teen, having been convent-educated and so on, I always had a feeling of being a 'hybrid'. I can't really read and write my own mother tongue; its literature is lost to me. I was defensive initially, but at some point you have to accept that this is what I think in. English is an Indian language, it is my language, and I use it the way I do – in hybrid fashion! It's the way we speak here. Syntax and grammar is fine, but there is a way that Indians speak, and that is what the Indian reader will relate to.

NC: I studied Bengali from class 2 to 12. We had a drowsy old chap for a teacher, who would give us a page to write every day and cross it in red ink so we could not show the same page the next day. I developed a great distaste for it. But we had very good English teachers. After a few years I stopped thinking in my mother tongue. But on whether Indian writers use English effectively or not – I would say they do. So many of them use it very very well. And differently from how a writer from the west does.

On publishing and reader reactions...

NC: There was huge exhilaration at first, that somebody like Harper was publishing my book. It went from contract to shelf in 1 year – in spite of a few legal issues. There was mixed feedback but overall I was happy. You come back to earth when you realise that your book is just another in a day's work for the publisher, who is like the gynaccologist delivering the baby! The publisher is not as excited as you are – especially the marketing team.

But the best part is opinions you get from reviewers, and even more so, feedback from readers.

CK: New titles are coming out everyday now. I have an idea, I have a story, I will write, and publish. That's the stuff in the market. People are writing, and writing. Whether these books are being read, or going to be remembered, we have no clue.

NC: But there must be a reason publishers are publishing too. Even the larger publishers are churning out many more titles than before. My suspicion is: nobody really knows what will make a bestseller. What they are going after is – print 3 to 5000 copies. The author will market his book anyway and you will at least break even. With the increase in titles publishers have given up marketing, publicity, distribution... even cover design; the author can take on as much as he /she wants.

CK: So publishers now seek writers who can market, rather than writers who can write – how many on your mailing list, how many followers on FB, how

many on Twitter!

NC: Well, a lot of writers today do their best to push their work. It has become a lot more money driven too – retail chains are monetising shelf space now.

Characters, Caricatures, 'Inside' jokes

NC: The publisher asked me, will people in Delhi understand these potshots you are taking at Malayalis, like Bose, Jolie, etc. I said some will get it and that's good enough.

I did wonder if I over-caricatured Mrs Chaddha. I knew that the south Indians would chuckle over this stereotyping of north Indians, while the latter would crib that I overdid it a tad. I've tried to spread it out. A reader commented – there are a lot of digs but there's no malice. I did not want to take random potshots. This is my Bangalore, a salad bowl...

CK: These 'inside' jokes, like 'Hootie and the blowfish' (*Seven Days*) or 'Balika vadhu' (*Bali*) – you have fun doing them. And you trust that enough people will get it even though there will be some who don't.

NC: We'll be dead in xyz years anyway, and in all probability without selling a 100,000 copies of anything, so we might as well have fun doing it! I'm going to be a bit obnoxious now, and say that only when you're really local can you be really global! One of the reasons a film like *Pathar Panchali* is loved by so many people everywhere, is because it is so local.

Political / social influences on themes

CK: In a sense aren't we all political

animals? I am not talking about party politics – ‘being political’ is a different thing. We think about the world and have our own views about it. Fiction need not be written with a message – indeed that would be dreary – but a writer has her notions of the world, and they come to the fore.

I did not have Po’s stories mapped out beforehand – I simply let the magic happen. I let Po start talking, and watched what came out. It wasn’t a story, it was a slice of life. I had experienced this ‘other Bangalore’ as a journalist, I’d seen the non-middle-class side of life in great depth. Towards the end, when the little boy gets lost and runs into this doubtful neighbourhood – I’ve been there, spoken to people there, been invited into their huts and sat on the floor with the drain flowing outside. All this is at the back of your head, these are your politics.

Black Lentil is a coming of age story, but also political. I started it in 1996 and finished it in 2000. It had Hindus forming an ultra-nationalist party and bombing a place with a large Muslim population. At the time, it was a somewhat bizarre idea, a ‘hindu-fundu’ group indulging in outright violence! But what happened in the early ‘90s had preyed heavily on my mind and it came out in the book.

NC: You’re lucky to have your journalist background. I led a sheltered life – it was constrained in many ways. I was not sure I could pull off a realistic

first novel. And I am a fantasy buff – even the second book, though set in the real world, is fundamentally fantasy; these things don’t happen! Everything is a little Wodehousian, as a reader commented! I have neither the skill nor the life experience of an R K Narayan who can take up the gentle ebb and flow of living and make it interesting. I need colour and situations and action. And I have to depend on imagination more than anything else. I have not been to war zones, or covered slums or riots and that’s ok. I have to use what I have.

CK: Not to hold you to it but what I’m trying to tell you is there is a political self in you somewhere which is underlying even *Bali* – it might be fantasy but one can see the feminist side, and there’s moral censorship, and so on...

NC: Yes, and in *Secretive Sister* the policeman talks about the water situation affecting farmers and land being indiscriminately sold off. My father was quite political. So I guess it rubbed off.

What next?

NC: My next book is going to be straight from the heart, about coming of age in Shillong.

CK: And my next is completely different from the ones before – again! There is a brother and there is a sister. They are in two different places and they don’t know that they’re connected...



POETRY

Tumbling Through The Temple

Geetha Ravichandran

Geetha is a bureaucrat posted in Bangalore. She enjoys writing now and then.

As we entered, we could not see Ganesha dance
For he was smeared over with vermillion and sacred ash.
We only saw a sea of pious heads
And eager hands darting for the burning camphor blessing.
We went from shrine to shrine dutifully, following mother
Muttering prayers under our breath, hoping for something grand.
The best part was Hanuman who stood, hands clasped, etched on a pillar
Smothered with butter and garlanded with tulsi leaves.
We could slyly snatch a pinch of the butter and lick it up.
Instructed to fall on the cold, stone floor, look up at the flag
And herded to join the queue of jostling worshippers,
Standing on our toes, we could glimpse the waving lights.
As the chant and the chimes faded,
demands were made and barter struck
Flowers, squashed bananas and broken coconuts
Were distributed as a mark of favour, by the priests.
They were portents, they could grant wishes sought,
We grabbed our share of grace.
In the chamber, the sixty-three poets stood forgotten
Left alone by devotees, except for a burning lamp,
surrounded by silence, their songs appropriated
their bliss frozen in stone images,
while on a platform, pipes and drums blast their music
to announce a success, a celebration.
Worship over, we now raced up
to where the peacock was caged
And sometimes shrieked,
as this was once the land where he had strutted free.
Mother said it was holy to be shut up there
and it was a blessing to even see it.
As we stepped out, swarms of beggars
inched towards us, hands extended
Neither holy nor blessed,
plain wretched, I thought
But mother said, don't ask too many questions,
this is something you will not yet understand.

FICTION

P Shukla and L Luthria are Bangalore based advocates who occasionally enjoy writing fiction.

An Old Client

P Shukla & L Luthria

The volumes of the Indian Companies Act, both 1956 and 2013, were stacked neatly on the desk to one side. On the other side were the three volumes of Ramaiya's commentary on the new Act, each weighing at least 2 kgs.

S Aaryan picked up one volume and placed it beside the file lying open on the desk with a page of handwritten notes next to it. It didn't matter that the notes had absolutely nothing to do with Company law and had been pulled out of a property transaction file and related to easementary rights. At least they were in his hand. His computer screen was tilted to an angle that ensured visibility of the Supreme Court Cases Online page from across the table. Aaryan had confirmed this by running around to the other side and sitting on the chair opposite. Satisfied, he had come back to his seat and placed his uncapped pen across the page of notes to look as if it had just been flung down.

Deciding that he had succeeded in creating the impression of a busy, yet ready to take on more work, lawyer, Aaryan pulled a volume of Ramaiya towards himself and opening it in the middle, waited nervously. It was not every day that the senior partner, when

out of town, called the junior most advocate in the firm and told him to meet a long-standing client. It became that much more significant when said client also happened to be the senior partner, Ramesh Hegde's golfing buddy.

Aaryan had done his homework by asking around (mostly among the firm's junior lawyers and the office boy) and had found out that Mr. Nirmal Parekh was the Promoter and Director of a company with a fifty crore turnover, which he managed along with his son. Aaryan guessed that he was coming to consult M/s Hegde, Kumar and Associates regarding an issue related to his company, hence the strategic placement of company law texts on his desk. A client like this Nirmal Parekh could turn out to be quite a coup for Aaryan and a slap in the face for Rohit who, being a few years senior, thought a little too much of himself. If nothing else, it would stop his jibes about how the most time consuming and least billable matters were palmed off to raw beginners to keep them busy and to ensure they were occupied with things where they could do the least harm.

When the door opened, Aaryan looked up with what he hoped was the look of a busy lawyer but then scrambled to hide

a double take because the man ushered in by the office boy was certainly not the suited, suave gentleman he had expected. Nirmal Parekh looked like he had just walked off a golf course. Except which golf course would have allowed those fluorescent multi-coloured sneakers, Aaryan could only wonder.

Nirmal Parekh came forward with his hands outstretched and further surprised Aaryan with, “Yo, dude. I dig that Ramesh asked me to meet a young person in his office. He can be so straight-laced himself.”

Aaryan’s smile froze in its place. He did not quite know how to respond to the unusual conversation opener.

“I find,” continued Nirmal Parekh, “that young people are much more capable of thinking out of the box. Sort of like me.”

“I will do my best, sir.”

“No, no, no, NO. None of this formality. Call me Nirmal, and I will call you Aaryan. Anyway, age is just a number and I,” he affirmed with a flourish of his hands, “am a young man.”

Aaryan, floundering a little beyond his depth but remembering the first rule of never letting your client control a meeting, even if he is as old as your grandfather, decided to take the situation in hand. “So how can I help you Mr. um... Nirmal?” he asked in the most professional tone he could muster.

Nirmal Parekh was obviously waiting for an opening to start off on his autobiography. Making it clear that it was difficult to be modest but he was only stating facts, he explained that he was a self made man. He’d had the good

sense, forty years earlier, to start his own company, sourcing flowers and herbs and distilling their essential essences and had then diversified into sandalwood because of the great demand for it. He went on at length about how difficult it was to source something like sandalwood which was under government control. But he had managed, with his wide network of contacts, to deal with the forest department. Through his efforts and hard work (and probably deep pockets, thought Aaryan) he had built up the company, Scentsational Private Limited, to the position it now stood.

Aaryan was extremely impressed. Here was a man with true entrepreneurial spirit which continued well into his seventies. And how cool was he? In his pink polo T-shirt, khaki chinos and clip-on Bluetooth earpiece, he seemed so ‘with it’. True his shoes were a bit ‘OTT’ but he could be forgiven for trying. The man came across as a person who had embraced the twenty first century. Aaryan’s own grandfather, who had retired from a boring government job in the statistics department, now spent his life in a monkey cap, attempting to pick up the TV remote, coffee cup and The Hindu all at once. Aaryan felt his grandfather could take serious lessons in life from Nirmal who was telling him that because he now had the time, he spent it travelling around the world.

Better and better, thought Aaryan. But somewhere, the lawyer in him was beginning to wonder where it was all heading while at the same time, young man that he was, he cast surreptitious glances at the time on his computer

screen; worried that he would be required to sacrifice his lunchtime.

Oblivious to Aaryan's worries and despite the fact that he would be billed by the hour, Nirmal, glad to have a young, attentive ear had moved on to how it was now the 'in' thing to give back to society and therefore he made time to attend Lion's club parties in between travelling and playing golf. In the midst of it all he did his best to keep an eye on 'that good for nothing' son of his, to ensure that the company he had so carefully nurtured was not ruined. He then complained bitterly about his son, a man without any concept of filial duty and a control freak to boot. Not only had he wrested control over the management of the company but was also eyeing the rest of his father's assets.

Finally this is getting somewhere, thought Aaryan, he obviously needs our help to regain control of his company.

"So why did you agree to hand over management of the company to your son?" enquired Aaryan. Somehow he could not see Nirmal in the role of a victim.

"I was forced to, having foolishly divided up the shares in the company equally between myself, my son, my daughter and my wife. So when the three of them ganged up against me, I was in the minority. They insisted I hand over all management to my son, in the guise, of course, of my needing to take things easy. I was not fooled; I knew it was a conspiracy to oust me, but unfortunately at that inopportune time I had a heart attack. By the time I came out of the hospital, they, having presumed I would

not survive, had taken everything into their own hands.'

This then, thought Aaryan, was the crux of the case.

Nirmal Parekh was however in no hurry to get to the point. He was fulminating at length about his son's and to some extent his daughter's, "shockingly disrespectful" behaviour towards the father who had "given them everything in life" including the best schooling and college education. He had even sent his "below average" son abroad for a business course and given his daughter boxes of jewellery at the time of her marriage, and the grandest possible wedding. "And I paid a huge dowry. What more can a father do? Despite all that I have done for them, the ungrateful wretches threw me out of my own company, built up with my blood and sweat! That daughter of mine, who knows nothing of business, is now sitting in my office and also on the board of directors."

Nirmal took a breath and looked expectantly at Aaryan, who was beginning to feel very sorry for the way in which this old man had been treated by his family. He couldn't imagine his grandfather, despite his mild manner, ever being treated so badly by his own children.

Aaryan responded sympathetically, "I am truly at a loss for words; it's amazing how people can be so mean, especially to elderly people."

His concern only made Nirmal Parekh flushed and agitated.

"I am quite dismayed at your use of the word 'elderly' in association with me. I will have you know that I am very young

at heart..."

Aaryan, taken aback, perversely thought about the heart attack.

"...and anyway as everyone knows, 75 is the new 30," finished Nirmal Parekh with aplomb.

Is it? Since when, puzzled Aaryan. To his mind, this was beginning to sound too much like a Shoba De interview. Besides, he had no clue how to react professionally to a statement like that; in his 23 year old world view, even 30 was considerably over the hill.

Satisfied with himself at having set the record straight with his young lawyer, Nirmal Parekh was anxious to continue his tale of woe, of which he was relishing the telling. After being humiliated, he said, he had tried to throw his son and family out of the house but his son had rudely informed him that the house was anyway in his mother's name and he would only leave if she told him to. Besides, he had had the temerity to suggest that the house was built on land purchased with inherited money so he and his family were entitled to stay there. In the opinion of Nirmal Parekh, this was a complete and utter falsehood. "I purchased the land and constructed the house out of my own hard earned money. The only mistake I made was to have it registered in my wife's name instead of mine. Who would ever have thought that I would be stabbed in the back like this? And ..."

Aaryan interrupted him and said, "It would appear that your son has consulted a lawyer on his rights in the property."

Nirmal Parekh looked thoughtful and said, "Both of us used to come to this firm for legal advice relating to the

company."

"If you think he might possibly have consulted us on his rights, then I will have to check with Mr. Hegde. There may be some conflict of interest."

"That is likely to complicate things," mused Nirmal Parekh, "but anyway," he said cheerfully, "it is not concerning the property that I am here today."

What is this person's problem? thought Aaryan, beginning to lose patience.

"Actually, I am here because of my wife's unreasonable and traitorous behaviour in supporting her children over her husband. A husband, mind you, who has lifted her out of the mire of poverty and backwardness and provided her with a life of luxury and comfort. I have now decided to divorce her."

If it was possible for Aaryan's jaw to have dropped any further, it would have. Instead he managed to knock over the carefully arranged pile of company law books onto the floor.

Completely self-absorbed, Nirmal Parekh barely noticed Aaryan scrabbling around to put things back on the table.

"I demanded that my wife tell my son to leave the house but she flatly refused. In total defiance of my wishes, I will have you know. Obviously her son and grandchildren are more important to her than my likes and dislikes. I..."

He broke off and stared at the wall, while Aaryan, now back in his chair and feeling more uncomfortable by the minute, shifted uneasily. He thought of his grandfather who was blatantly henpecked by his grandmother, and teased by everyone for loving it.

"I am all alone in the world," resumed

Nirmal Parekh with a wobble to his chin. "I, who have spent my life taking care of everyone and generally doing good for people around me, have been cursed with an uncaring and disrespectful family. To top it all, my wife, whom I have tolerated for so many years, dares to tell me that she doesn't have to go along with what I want."

"She has always been so quiet and colourless, other than her choice in sarees. The only noise she makes is with her bhajans and kirthans, which she holds once a week at home with a bunch of irritating old women. Now of course there is Sanskar TV also, it is on the whole time. I could ignore all this earlier but since I was forced to retire and spend more time at home, it gets on my nerves."

It seemed like the usual grandmotherly behaviour to Aaryan and he wondered whether his grandfather found his wife equally irritating. He, didn't think so; they were both pretty much stuck to Sanskar TV together.

Nirmal Parekh, who would have been upset at being compared to Aaryan's grandfather, was too caught up in the tirade against his wife to notice the slightly disapproving expression on Aaryan's face.

"I don't know what has gotten into her, she has informed me that it is about time she 'stood up for herself', whatever that means. I have done so much for her. She has no class of her own to speak of, no taste, no elegance. Throughout my life I was forced to buy her hideous gold jewellery and those gaudy sarees. She was never interested in wearing any classy stuff. Even so, when we attend

dinners and functions you should see the sour face which my wife wears to them. As if I am forcing her to do something distasteful. I mean they are just parties, for goodness' sake, there is no wife swapping involved. In any case, who would want to swap with me?"

Aaryan wondered if the man was trying to shock deliberately. He was beginning to feel sorry for the traditional, Sanskar TV watching, grandma Parekh, having to attend parties frequented possibly by spaghetti strapped chiffon clad ladies.

"So..." said Aaryan brusquely, once again recalling the rule about taking control, "what exactly is it that you need our help with Mr Parekh?" All the friendly banter with Nirmal was getting him absolutely nowhere. He had already missed the office lunch and he would have to fend for himself. The office boy who liked his post lunch siesta would not appreciate being sent off to parcel a lunch and for the junior most Advocate, there could be nothing worse than incurring the wrath of the office boy.

"Perhaps I need to think about this a little further," said Nirmal Parekh who had been slightly taken aback by Aaryan's abrupt tone, "and I will also speak to Ramesh over the phone."

"Do that," said Aaryan, standing up and shaking Nirmal Parekh's hand. He had got two billable hours from this meeting, for whatever it was worth.

"I will tell Ramesh I had fun. Ciao."

Winding up his corporate lawyer display, Aaryan headed out of the office. He had decided that the best way to dispel the aftertaste of a client like Mr. Parikh was to dig into a hot, crisp masala

dosa with its accompanying little cup of ghee at MTR, followed by a steaming cup of coffee.

I rather like my grandfather in his monkey cap, thought Aaryan benevolently as he walked down the road. His phone rang just as he was crossing the busy thoroughfare but seeing as it was Mr. Hegde, Aaryan took the call while balanced on the median.

“How did it go?” enquired Mr Hegde.

“Well it appears Sir, that Mr.Parekh is contemplating divorcing his wife.”

There was silence down the line and Aaryan wondered if in all the traffic, he had missed the response. But shortly, Mr Hegde’s voice came through, “Oh well! I don’t think he is serious. He is very upset with his family right now. In any case we don’t do divorce matters. But I do hope you heard him out.”

“Yes Sir, we spent two hours discussing things.”

“Good, good. That’s the least we owe old clients. And Aaryan, don’t bother billing him for it.”

Aaryan, standing in the midst of the traffic whizzing past him in both directions, realised that Rohit was right after all, he had been had.



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The Case Of The Secretive Sister
Nilanjan P Choudhury

Harper Collins

Review: C K Meena

New detective on the block

The Chatterjee Institute of Detection might at first glance remind you of Precious Ramotswe's No.1 Ladies Detective Agency in the Alexander McCall-Smith series. Like that traditionally-built woman in Botswana who has a penchant for gossip, homespun philosophy and red bush tea, Nilanjan P. Choudhury's creation Mr Chatterjee too is a solver of life's minor mysteries. And just as Mma Ramotswe has Grace Makutsi to assist her, Mr Chatterjee has his secretary, Miss Jolly. But there the resemblance ends. In wild contrast to the sedate pace of life in Gaborone, *The Case of the Secretive Sister* (an Erle Stanley Gardner-esque title, if ever there was one) is located plum in the middle of chaotic, modern Bangalore.

Mr Chatterjee's unlikely clients are a nouveau riche Punjabi couple whose daughter Pinky flunks the interview for admission into nursery at the super-elite Holy Angels School. The formidable principal, Sister Eunice D'Souza, is known to never re-consider a candidate she has turned down once. But does the Sister have an Achilles Heel, a weakness that the detective could exploit, to coerce her to reconsider? As Mr Chatterjee bumbles along, he finds himself caught in an insane whirligig that propels him from one

disastrous situation to the next. It is a series of farcical events that simply cries out for a Paul Fernandes illustration to capture it – as he does with his usual flair on the cover.

Choudhury's humour is the laugh-out-loud kind – the kind one saw in his debut novel *Bali and the Ocean of Milk*. Here, he cranks it up to high farce. The reader would do well to bury her political correctness six feet deep when meeting Mrs Pammy Chaddha, a behnji-type who is desperate to be part of “the hi-fi, status people”, or Miss Jolly Kutty the prim Malayali from Cochin who is beginning to have suspicions about the activities of her ‘bose’. Choudhury's background in theatre gives him a good ear for dialogue and he is pitch-perfect when capturing the speech patterns of these two hilarious characters, and indeed of all the others, major and minor, including the ferocious Inspector Gowda and Mr Chatterjee's teenage daughter Shanta.

There is a skilfully written chapter where the reader is fooled into believing she has found out the nun's secret, only to have the rug pulled out expertly from under her feet. This is a book that can be read in one breathless sitting. Bangalore landmarks and localities are strewn across the pages. One can virtually trace the path of the hapless detective as he flees from the clutches of the tenacious Inspector. I have one bone to pick with the author: there is no bus that takes you straight from St Mark's Road to Cunningham Road.

But hey, this is fiction, and shackles must not restrain BMTC buses, nor the writer's imagination.



Dreams for the Dying
CK Meena

Dronequill

Reading Hour Review

This is a very enjoyable murder mystery set across three states in South India. The book begins on a note of understated menace, with a murder, and proceeds to unravel the why. I liked the fact that there doesn't follow a huge pile up of bodies, with gruesome killings happening every few pages to keep a reader's interest up. CK does that rather well with her three parallel story lines, her characterisation, her spare but effective detailing of scenes and very, very short chapters – some are barely a page!

The action begins in the early hours of the morning, at a flat in Sunrise Apartments, Chennai, with a waiter from the neighbouring Elite Hotel knocking on the door. One by one, the characters are introduced – the couple, Uma and VK, who live in the flat; VK's boisterous Saturday gang; Bharat and Jyothi in Bangalore, grappling with a disintegrating marriage, poor old Parvathyamma, increasingly troubled by the blurring together of dreams and reality; the gangster Soda Ganesh and his alleged lack of a 'hobby'; and the elusive Radha Menon who sweeps a married man off his feet.

In this novel, train journeys are a recurring setting for introspection and life-changing events, an escape into a different

world, the subject of haunting dreams and relentless 'what-ifs'.

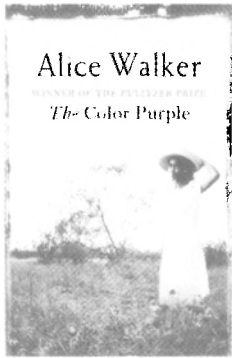
The 'detective' who investigates the Chennai murder is Sub-Inspector Magesh, with sidekicks Vaidy (Vaideeswaran) and Sami (Ponnusami). The detective and his team, thankfully, aren't caricatured to the point of absurdity. Magesh is a bachelor, and in his secret fantasies, 'ace detective Magnum Magesh'.

In spite of all that is revealed about the protagonist Uma in the story, her essential character still feels out of reach. She puzzles and intrigues the reader throughout, just as she does SI Magesh, who struggles to make sense of the jottings in her diary. In some instances she comes across almost idiot-like – indeed she is branded 'Tubelight' by her sisters as a child; she is the one routinely humiliated and punished by her father, the sibling-in-the-middle with no voice or personality. And yet, she is an independent woman with a job, travelling on her own, using public transport, and unabashedly reading a magazine usually sought by middle-aged men or schoolboys.

Only in the last chapter do they break the surface, the motivations of a woman who, when she looked in the mirror, 'saw no one special. Sometimes, she saw no one at all'.

Meena's writing has a wonderfully local flavour and is full of humour. The plot takes one through the requisite twists and turns to a satisfying denouement. *Dreams for the Dying* is well worth a read.

Fans of the genre, do get hold of this book if you can, you won't be disappointed.



The Color Purple
Alice Walker

POCKET BOOKS

Review: Manjushree Hegde

Celie is a poor, black girl in the American South of the 1930s. She is, at the age of fourteen, repeatedly raped by her 'father', has two children by him, and is then married off to a widower. There, she is abused, beaten, and forced to work without rest. Her sexual encounters with her husband are wretched and without passion, and she dislikes them as much as the beatings. It is at a time like this that Shug (Sugar) Avery enters into Celie's life. Sugar is unlike other black women. She is a successful singer – independent, rich, sophisticated, well-travelled, and free-spirited. She is also Celie's husband's lover. Celie is forced to take care of her during an illness, and this establishes a friendship between them which later turns into infatuation, and then into love. Sugar teaches Celie that she, like every other person, deserves happiness and affection. She helps Celie to heal, to learn that her life is her own to make and that her innate worth is unquestionable, incorruptible. Alice Walker also sets up an important subplot revolving around Celie's sister, Nettie, and her time as a missionary in Africa.

The Color Purple deals with a black woman's struggle to free herself from a position of servitude in a male-dominated society. Celie, Nettie, Sophia, Shug Avery,

each of them must fight her own battle against repression and prejudice, each of them must help themselves and each other. When it was written, the book stirred up a storm of controversy. Walker was accused of representing black society in very harsh light and tarnishing the black-male image. Later, it won the Pulitzer Prize and is now accepted as a modern Classic.

It is written in first person in epistolary style. In the beginning, out of despair, Celie addresses her letters to God. She does not expect anyone to read them, and she writes like she talks – in broken folk-dialect. "Dear God", she writes, talking about her husband, "He beat me like he beat the children. He say, Celie, get the belt... It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That's how come I know trees fear men." Later, she starts addressing them to her sister, Nettie. In her unique voice, Celie paints a vivid picture of her life, and as she matures she finds a deep reservoir of inner strength within her.

It is a beautiful, beautiful read. In one instance, Shug Avery tells Celie, "I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it". The colour purple must be marvelled at for no other reason than that it exists. Celie is like that colour purple. She does not think her existence has any worth, but she eventually comes to an understanding that, "I may be black. I may be ugly. But I'm here," and that is enough. *The Color Purple* has complex characters and complex themes, but Walker has dealt with them in a simple, honest manner. It is not a depressing read. In the end, we are left with the conviction that "we are in the world to love each other".

FICTION

Five More Minutes

Percy Bharucha

It had been exactly five minutes since she finished typing it. An email of four lines that would announce unceremoniously the ending of another chapter in her life. It lay there in her 'Drafts' folder. Somehow modernity never did justice to the gravity of a situation. One single button-click was all it took; that hardly captured the ceaseless turmoil that had led up to it, or the unending hesitation she still felt in sending it. Brevity, always considered to be the sister of efficiency somehow stunted her, it denied her closure. The bland 4 letter word 'Send' was hardly cathartic; it wasn't even there anymore, just a small arrow symbol remained, for a word that would never hold up in real conversation. Little faces had replaced words, moods; emotions were dots and dashes instead of sentences. Brevity was turning the world into a funny place; it was convenient, faster, and had devolved the human species back into their most primal cave drawing, finger painting form.

It had been some time since she had packed the last of her belongings into her suitcases. Seven years of her life in two measly suitcases that she knew would never muster social approval.

Percy is a Young India Fellow. When not writing he has a full time job in advertising and hopes to keep it.

Battered, soot-covered and moth-eaten at the edges, her suitcases were like her; they would get another look, but only to confirm initial disappointment. The sum weight of her recent past was two suitcases. She didn't even have to pay the cab for extra baggage; pragmatism was almost self-defeating at this point – torn between convenience and the realisation of having amassed so little. It had scarcely taken her an hour to pack everything, an hour to accumulate years; how easy it was to wrap up her life, how disappointing! Couldn't there have been more of it?

People are so used to gravitas being associated with hardship, patience and conflict that something that happened smoothly was never quite important enough. But this was, and she desperately needed it to have its moment. The building doorman had nonchalantly remarked, "Off for a weekend trip, luv?" and she wanted to strangle him. No, she was leaving, leaving for good, damn it why didn't the world give her that! She was going away, never to return and they treated her like a weekend tourist. It was almost as if the Lord, on his way to exile kept getting offered deals on honeymoon packages in the hills, "Fourteen years?" they would exclaim, "But where's all your

stuff?”

It had been exactly 24 minutes into her supposed last day at work. Her very last day, and she was early even for that. A last minute spontaneous decision to quit and run, she had packed up her life and still managed to get to office before the rest. She poured herself the first cup of coffee thinking, this was what work did to you, it made you hollow, empty; miserable, lonely, emotionally unstable but, it made damn sure you got there on time.

She worked in an advertising agency, where “five more minutes” was their daily mantra, it didn’t matter what the client wanted or how big it was or how much time it would take, the answer was still the same. It was an Indian tendency that she had carried across to foreign shores. In India if you asked someone how much time would they take to reach a certain place, irrespective of whether they were miles away, or stuck in a horrendous traffic jam, or just next door the answer was always, “five more minutes.” This was a universal convention: everybody believed in it and everybody followed it. As a result of which those five minutes had lost all semantic value, it was never to be believed: in fact, it meant that the thing in question could probably take forever. Doctors did it with their patients in waiting, concert organizers did it to large crowds, cab drivers did it, as did building engineers, even real estate developers: When will we be able to move in to this new building?” “Sir paanch minute de do bas” (just give us five minutes) “But

you’re still constructing the foundation!” “Wo bas do minute main ban jaayega” (that’ll be ready in the next two minutes). She imagined God at the beginning of creation being asked by his angels, “How long will it be?” “Five minutes Peter”. Three days of PlayStation later God was asked again, “Umm, Lord there are people out there waiting for you, we can’t keep pushing back the launch date you know, how long will you be?” “Five more minutes Petey, I promise.”

Yeah, that’s probably how it all began.

When she thought about it, it had been one of those countless “five more minutes” days when this had all begun. She had been running late at work and by the time she made it out of the office, she had missed her usual bus home. Humans are funny creatures: ask us about our favourite movies and books and we can’t decide but a favourite bus, metro, train – there’s always one. Ask people why they won’t take the 6:30 instead of the 7:00 even though they get off work at 6:00 and they’ll come up with creative ways to justify their absurdities. Oh there’s that homeless guy who takes that, no, my sister’s roommate’s boyfriend’s father takes that and isn’t he a bore! The seats are smaller, there’s too much sun in your face, the metro driver is crazy – he’s always braking too hard. Random trivia that the brain conjures up in defence of its own irrationality. It was like the frog in the well, who thought the well was an ocean and the walls were infinitely apart. But it was hard to stem the swell of anger and frustration that missing her bus had caused. It was one of those questioning

your life days already and with the bus thing it had turned into a full-scale introspection down the cesspool of lost causes. We're a precarious species, it takes so little to push us off the edge; one negative review, an indifferent response from someone we look up to and we drown ourselves in retrospective inadequacy. Like the Ouroboros sees its own tail as a threat and continues to engulf it till it realizes it has devoured itself, that realization is almost never afforded to the self-critical, he continues to devour himself endlessly till there is nothing left but the empty faded shed skin of a former soul.

Back at the bus stop, she had noticed a crowd assembled around a man with a guitar. A crowd that had never been there before. It was a strange accident, her missing the bus and discovering this. One that stood out, like the tune that was playing. A tune that stood out against the random notes of the mundane. It was a slow, mournful tune, one that was instantly relatable and yet alien to everything she had heard. A mop of curls she saw bent over the instrument, eking out painfully each sustained note against the omnipresent vacuum. The thick heavy curtains of nothingness were parted by the melody, offering a peek of another life, the life worth living perhaps. And almost as mystically and suddenly as it had begun it ended, on a high note of promise, its echo haunting, as it slowly faded away against the onslaught of nature eager to resume its ambient noise. It was then that she saw his face, too creased for its age. Furrowed and

wrinkled like a napkin folded over too many times. Like an amateur origami artist who had unfolded his work and started over again and again, each fold overlapping the memory of a previous attempt. And as she attempted to fathom the iteration behind each crease another bus had arrived. In a trance she boarded it and did not realize that the seat next to her had been occupied by the source of her inquiry. A scent wafted over, curious, inviting and yet lined with hesitation. A slow smile and a proffered hand were met after the patient pause of three stops. That bus ride was almost an act of rebellion against her fate, her fortuitous mistake, an act that forced her to evaluate the small probabilities that were life altering. What were the odds? But yet circumstances had aligned and introductions and interests matched. Did ordinary people really deserve such chances; perhaps it was a random act of kindness the machine behind this chaos offered to those at the brink, a final chance for redemption before they leapt into nothingness. It was the universe's last-ditch attempt to stop another casualty; perhaps the chaos machine did have some accountability mechanism built into it. A report if you will, of entities that had self-destructed, perhaps there was a happiness coefficient it had to adhere to. At that point she was glad if such a parameter existed, for there would be nothing else to look forward to otherwise.

Somebody had told her affection was like the flu, you hated how it made you feel, but there was a feeling of

overcompensation in the attention the world gave you, that made up for it. Your body would be on fire but the heart beat ever louder, and the mind made up for it by generating a positivist resurgence, an emotional tour de force to make up for the body's malfunctioning. It was unlike anything else, where there was heaving and coughing and snot; a greater renewal in the purpose of life and a greater will than ever before to fight for it. That was the paradox of human illness, ailing made us feel more alive than anything and we clutched to life evermore tightly, when we felt our physical forms detaching from it. That was affection and love and it had hit her like an epidemic. Oftentimes in love when people become intertwined there is a constant struggle for the individual self of both, a constant tension and anxiety caused by the retention of one's own being against that of a moulded extension that the other creates. Like the point where the river meets the ocean it is hard to separate the water of one from the other, where on the one hand there is the potential to be a part of the enormousness that no individualness can match, there is also the loss of the self to the point of becoming just another part of a greater whole, a part indistinguishable from any other part. The generic-ness of enormity is what all-personal individuality strives against and yet secretly desires. The idea of fame, being in a band and yet being the least known member. Was love worth it if it led to a loss so severe? Greater mortals than her had fought with this question only to find the answers wanting. As of now she was just glad to be there in

that enclosed time and space where her life bore meaning even if that meaning depended on a merged existence.

Four months of blissful relationship had passed and the moulded extension had overtaken the whole and her creative side had emerged dominant; she would go soul-searching with her partner and leave behind this life of empty co-ordination. She had decided to quit and begin again. An aged moth doubtful of ever spinning a cocoon would try in the hopes of emerging with wings young and a being ephemeral.

A day and time had been set for this and today was that final day of spinning when she would enter the cocoon uncertain about what would emerge at the other end, but a prolonged hibernation was due from the life of the moth. The worker bee phase of her life was over and a carefree wasp would emerge that would drone and buzz with life over things anew. Her plans were already made, her bags were at a friend's place; she would pick them up on her way to the airport, where she would meet him, and together they would fly away. All that remained to be done was to hit the little arrow symbol but still she hesitated, maybe she could send it from the airport. If she sent it now they would try and stop her, wouldn't they? Somebody would plead with her not to leave right? After all, she had been there for a long, long time. But what if they didn't, what if nobody saw it, or worse, saw it and ignored it. She decided it was too much to risk; she couldn't bear to find out. She decided to send the email before boarding the flight

– that would make it too late for either outcome to change her mind. It would be perfect, oh, how they would lament the next day at losing her, and for the months to come, feel guilty about letting her go! It was vaguely empowering – the thought of people feeling powerless to stop you from leaving them.

She left early that day hoping that someone would notice and try to chastise her and that she could do her little rebel routine and turn around and say she didn't give a fuck anymore. Sadly the world would not afford her that pleasure and nobody turned an eyebrow at her leaving an hour before she usually did. It was still sunny outside; she couldn't remember the last time she had left the office while the sun was still out. So this is what it felt like to have the evening rays on your face, apart from the usual cloak and dagger stuff of the night. She walked to the bus station, got onto the bus she needed to, found a seat and let her mind switch off. Travelling always had this peculiar effect on her: it was like being under the shower; you just wanted to stand under it forever. It had something to do with the feeling of being in motion while your body was still, it was almost as if the brain refused to deal with that contradiction and switched itself off. It was such a glorious feeling when that happened. She could observe but not analyse, feel but not judge, hear sounds but not process or respond to them: the perfect state of being. The wheels of the bus began to turn as the cogs of her brain stopped. This route was different and so was the neighbourhood, there were songs

playing in her head, an automated playlist on loop and yet she couldn't make out the words as they faded away until they were no more than mere guttural sounds.

The bus stopped at a light and a swanky car with its top down and a young couple inside pulled up next to her window. They waved at her, and she could see they were in love, it made you do nice things, that feeling. She thought of herself in a car like that driving while he played his guitar for her, they would never need an audio system for the car. But since the bus was no longer in motion her brain hit back with a doozy, how would they ever afford such a car or even any car? He was a musician and she had just quit her job. Why did the bus have to stop? She forced herself to think of something else as the light turned green. Another person had just sat down next to her and she winced as she squeezed her body into a tighter space. But the bus moved on and as she stared through the window, her face plastered against the glass, a funny thing happened – call it optics or whatever you want to – she began to see herself against the backdrop of what was outside her reflection, the scenery without was intermeshing itself with her – it was like being photo shopped into the view outside. She saw herself at the entrance to a park with some kids playing, hesitating at the store window of a high-end shoe shop, and as the bus slowed down as it hit traffic she saw herself as a mannequin in a second hand wedding dress shop. Her heart stopped beating just for a moment, she could see rain coming down and as it poured it washed away the colour from

her world, she could see that everything was turning grey, as a stream of rainbow colour ran through a drain and into a manhole. All that remained against the stark ash coloured background was a redolent white wedding dress with her mannequin twin in it. She saw herself again, this time in the flesh, like in an old black and white Hollywood musical, walking five dogs, carrying two grocery bags and wearing a uniform that looked like she worked at the Laundromat down the street. The mannequin twin had suddenly become the least frightening thing in this picture. The bus moved on with a jerk that almost threw her off her seat. But she recovered to find her surroundings restored to normalcy, except that every time she looked out of the window her reflection remained devoid of colour. Grey, like an object in a cartoon strip, so insignificant that the artist forgot to paint it. Defined through the negative space created between other objects. The rest of the bus ride was a blur and didn't matter anyway. It was like the ending credits of a movie, nobody stayed back to watch them, nobody cared, insignificant details they were.

The whirring of a coffee machine and the beep of an email – that's how the next day began. The incessant chime of a ringtone and her voice saying, you guessed it, "Five more minutes." Her call log showed 15 calls ignored, from an unknown outstation number. A mouse pointer hovered over a single email that lay in her drafts folder, it moved over the little 'arrow' icon and finally found its resting place over a tiny garbage bin. The best things in life end up the same way, in the trash, not because they are no longer wanted, oh they so desperately are, but because they can no longer be afforded. The better things always make the good seem obsolete, old and insignificant and like all insignificance the good flows down the drain into the manhole of obscurity.

Broken hearts could be nursed, creative urges postponed to the fullness of time. Somehow good wine had an answer to all that. Oh to hell with good, she had a job again; it was time to open "better" ones.

A better wine to soothe the bitter heart.



"We all have our routines," he said softly. "But they must have a purpose and provide an outcome that we can see and take some comfort from, or else they have no use at all. Without that, they are like endless paces of a caged animal. If they are not madness itself, then they are a prelude to it."

~ John Connolly, *The Book of Lost Things*

POETRY

Admiration

Ankush Banerjee

Ankush is a mental health professional. His first collection of poetry, 'An Essence of Eternity' (Sahitya Akademi, Delhi) is to be published later this year.

Sitting, in class, beside you,
with a book of love poems, I
feel young in an old way.

Reading verses off your hair
I learn 'the poetic' can be different
from 'poetry'.

'What are you doing, you idiot!', the
spindly teacher glowers, from
above her high rostrum.

Soon, the book of love poetry
is confiscated. I panic. Suddenly, a weight
washes off my back.

I am free now,
to look at you,
without having to search for shapes
in poetry books,
for a wonder

I can't name

.



Crossword solution

Across:

1 Complaints, 6 Sod, 8 Axe, 9 Adaptor, 10 Canon, 11 Commonalities, 13 Distastefully, 16 Spectacularly, 18 Stair, 19 Leached, 21 Ill, 22 Doe, 23 Yashmak

Down:

1 Pea, 2 Alarm, 3 Nitrobacteria, 4 Sarcastically, 5 Deceitfulness, 6 Sundial, 7 Dynasty, 12 Obi, 13 Disused, 14 Seepage, 15 Lol, 17 Rahim, 20 Dak

FIRST PERSON

The Cleaning Ladies Of Kabul

Rajesh Talwar

Rajesh has more than a dozen books to his credit. He has lived and worked in Afghanistan for several years. His most recent book is 'Courting Injustice: The Nirbhaya Case and Its Aftermath (Hay House, 2013).

Giorgia Pareto, my companion on the flight to Kabul, was the other inmate of the first guesthouse I stayed at in the Wazir Akbar Khan area. She wasn't too happy with the facilities provided there, particularly the laundry services.

"What's the problem?" I questioned her.

"They are destroying the fabrics," she explained sadly. "All the clothes are washed together, you see. They don't smell good and they are coming back damaged. I don't think I can stay here."

It wasn't only the Italian ladies though who were particular about their garments. Yagyesh, a Nepalese consultant on a USAID project told me of Francesco, another Italian, who had insisted that the cleaning ladies tell him when they were about to wash his clothes, and he would go over physically to ensure that they were washing his clothes separately and not using recycled washing powder, but the one that he had supplied them with. Eventually, though, this wasn't a practical working arrangement and he left.

Such accommodation was difficult to find in the strongly masculine Afghan culture, and privately I suspect, the Afghans sneered at these stated requirements, but it wasn't the only

problem that Giorgia faced. She didn't like the oily food, and she also complained of how, during the time she was working at her job, the cleaning ladies were using up her expensive perfumes, lotions and soaps. Fortunately I suffered from none of these problems, but then the soap and perfume I used was unlikely to appeal to Afghan women, even if they happened to be cleaning ladies.

Giorgia complained often, but continued to live at the guest house for some weeks. An incident with the temporarily appointed Afghan lady manager (a relative of the owner) finally broke the proverbial camel's back and she determined to leave the guest house as soon as she could.

She was going away for a week to Dubai to meet up with her husband, and she told the manager, a tall, thirty something woman called Khalida to keep her room while she was gone.

Khalida suggested to her that she pack up everything and keep her luggage in the store room; that way she would not have to pay the fifty dollar per day rent for the hotel.

"No," said Giorgia, "I don't want to be bothered with packing. Just keep my room and I will pay the fifty dollars."

"Oh, but then," said Khalida, a crafty

look coming into her eyes, “but then, in that case you will have to pay sixty dollars.”

“I will have to pay sixty dollars!” exclaimed Giorgia, “when I’m not even living in the room.”

“Exactly!” insisted Khalida.

Giorgia asked Khalida to give this to her in writing and then Khalida backed off. But the incident affected Giorgia so much that she determined to leave the guest house once and forever.

Incidents such as these reminded me of some of the characters in Kafka’s ‘The Castle’, and indeed the feudal arrangements in the guest house sometimes resembled serf like structures that only superficially resembled democracy. What I mean by this, I will state a little further ahead.

Soon after her return from Dubai, Giorgia moved into a shared residence with three other ‘internationals’, but her trials with the cleaning ladies of Kabul were far from over, as I learnt during a subsequent coffee with her inside the plush Shamiana Restaurant with the Safi Landmark, one of the Dubai style shopping malls that had cropped up in Kabul.

“Do the cleaning ladies in your new accommodation not clean your clothes properly?” I asked upon learning that new problems had emerged.

“Oh, no,” she said, “my clothes are properly and separately washed.” She paused. “But they take their time over the washing. And they do little else.”

“So why don’t you speak to them?”

“I can’t speak to them,” she lamented. “No one can say anything to the cleaning ladies. They are connected, you see.”

I did not see, and wanted to know what on earth she meant.

It turned out that Gert, a German working for the Red Cross had taken up the house on rent. Gert was fluent in Dari, and knew many important Afghans; the cleaning ladies were related to one such important family. It was not possible to get rid of the cleaning ladies as taking such a step would ruffle the feathers of important feudal lords. Once they had been taken into the house, their status as ‘cleaning ladies’ notwithstanding, it was just not possible to throw them out. They were not only cleaning ladies, they were the ‘queens’ of the household and ruled the roost, so to speak.

The cleaning ladies were fully aware of their protected status and ‘lorded’ it over bona fide tenants such as Giorgia who paid thousands of dollars every month. It did not matter how much they paid; you could not fire the women.

Iris, a German lady who lived in the same house with Giorgia had a small incident with one of the cleaning ladies the very morning I had my coffee and conversation with Giorgia.

She came down a bit late to go to office, having been unwell, and found one of the cleaning ladies entertaining nine or ten guests in the living room with biscuits, cakes and tea made from the common kitchen resources, which were of course funded by the tenants.

She came into the living room, but before she could register her annoyance, an angry cleaning lady turned on her, and

in broken English instructed, “Not to disturb. We are busy now.”

To be fair, it wasn’t only the cleaning ladies who were protected in this fashion. I learnt that in many of the guest houses all over Kabul, there were security guards employed to guard the premises who were similarly related to important and influential families and could not be got rid of.

This is quite simply the way things worked in Kabul. Family provided protection and patronage.

My experiences in Kabul were also not bereft of encounters with cleaning ladies, and it taught me that if you were a cleaning lady with connections you were assured of many benefits including that of continued employment; on the other hand if you were just a cleaning lady plain and simple without any influential connections you were firstly a woman, and secondly totally powerless. I tipped the cleaning lady in my room fairly generously just to reward her for her efforts. A ten-dollar tip was half her monthly salary. She was extremely happy but made the mistake of sharing this information with others. I subsequently learnt that her supervisor, whom I had earlier tipped five dollars, had somehow

learnt of this higher tip. She had been accused of having solicited the amount from me in some fashion, and had come close to losing her job. It was a lesson to me to be careful even while tipping. You have to understand the hierarchies and make sure you don’t violate certain power structures, even if they concern the lives of those living in the lower strata. As the old saying goes, the way to hell is paved with good intentions.

On the subject of employees enjoying protection from dismissal, (as the cleaning ladies in Giorgia’s house do) I had gone to Kathmandu from Kabul during one of my breaks to meet Yves, a friend from Kosovo who worked on a EU project, and learnt from him that he had heard of domestic workers in Kathmandu enjoying similar protection because of connections with the Maoists.

“This servant was dismissed,” he said, “but he came back the next day with someone from the Maoist cadre who said this could not be done. Workers’ rights had to be respected.”

It seems that Afghanistan is not unique in the way patronage works – over here it is the important families who wield it and in Nepal it is the party that exercises influence.



last page

Who Wrote That?

Manjushree Hegde

A few weeks ago, I attended a workshop on poetry. On the first day, Karl taught us Robert Browning's masterpiece, *Porphyria's Lover*, a creepy, beautiful poem in which the protagonist strangles his lover – Porphyria – with her hair: "... and all her hair/in one long yellow string I wound/ three times her little throat around/ and strangled her"; after that, he tells us of the state of absolute beatitude that the murder left him in. Interestingly, Karl opened the class by playing a Guns 'n Roses and an Eminem song that ran along the same woman-killing lines.

Now, none of us had a problem recognizing that Eminem has not killed his ex wife Kim in real life; we knew that even though Eminem/Marshall Mathers has "Kim Rest In Pieces" tattooed on his belly, he is not ever going to be found guilty of uxoricide. We knew too that as crazy as Axl Rose might be with his regrettable plastic surgery, he most likely never buried anyone he dated in his backyard. Robert Browning, though, stumped us. At points such as when the lover opens Porphyria's eyes and anxiously looks for his image, the stain of his murder, one or another of us would ask: What did his wife think? What did his wife think about him killing so many women in his poetry? Isn't he crazy? Don't you think she was disturbed? Worried? Anxious? Hiding a Victorian ice pick beneath her pillow, breath bated and waiting for his commands?

What I think Karl wanted to do was to

prove exactly the point that gave us the wiggins: that the poet and the speaker are not always the same. They sometimes overlap, lying on top of each other like transparent leaves in an anatomy textbook, but they are never the same.

Is this true? I wonder. This idea of voice – who is speaking when I write – is it different from me? I look back, read my posts and feel this odd sensation of both recognizing myself in my writing and not. Yes, my writing sometimes feels like it belongs to someone else because perhaps I will never be the person I was at the moment I wrote it. The I of this sentence is gone, in part. The I of the previous one yet even more removed. And so on. With every passing moment, with every completed syntax, I get farther away from the person I was.

Except I don't. Writing is also recovery; it makes me remember the flotsam and jetsam of my life that I had successfully lost to the eddies of time. And when I have articulated and integrated the pointy shards of memory, it's made me wholer. Not whole, not yet. But less of a shattered amphora lying in ruins. I might not yet hold water, but it is my goal.

The word is never the thing; this we know from Plato, from Locke, from Descartes, from Saussure, from Lacan, from Derrida. The word is never, ever the thing; and yet we write. Even if as we write, we know we will never really reach our self, we write because if we don't, we stand no chance of ever getting closer.

I imagine Robert Browning felt similarly, even if he didn't, I imagine he did, as he wrote these sympathetic narratives of violent men. I imagine he found his writings to help him understand himself in ways he never realized were possible.

And I imagine Elizabeth Barrett Browning got that.

Don't you?



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